

A woman with blonde hair styled in a braid, wearing a white off-the-shoulder gown with a full skirt, stands in a room with pink walls and a large window. A chandelier is visible in the upper right corner.

TANYA WILDE

She's a Middleton . . .

A Promise OF Scandal

*A Promise
OF
Scandal*

*T*ANYA *W*ILDE

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Chapter 1

Monday afternoon

Middleton Drawing Room

Mayfair

“I fear I might have made a terrible mistake.”

Poppy Middleton, daughter to Charles Middleton and niece to the current Earl of Dashwood, set her teacup down on the table to give Beatrix Hale her full attention.

Beatrix was Poppy’s bosom friend and a famous actress—though no one knew her true identity, as she used the stage name ‘Charlotte.’ They’d met quite by accident on Bond Street six months ago when Beatrix had attempted to elude a suitor. Not in her nature to turn away a person in need, Poppy had stuck her booted foot out as the man in pursuit had hurried past her. Needless to say, the scoundrel had landed face first in a puddle of muddied water. Poppy had offered to accompany Beatrix to the theatre after that. An unlikely pair perhaps, but one carriage ride had been all it took for them to become fast friends.

“What happened?” Poppy asked, knitting her brows together. “Is that dreadful Mr. Hargrove bothering you at the theatre again?” Poppy had warned Beatrix to give the man a wide berth.

“Lord no. Hargrove is the least of my worries,” Beatrix said with a nervous laugh. “I overheard a conversation I should not have. It might be nothing, but it spooked me nonetheless.”

“Oh? Something juicy, I hope. Pray tell.”

“It’s dire, Poppy. I’m not sure I should even burden you with this.”

Poppy sat up straight. “Tell me, Beatrix. If what you overheard has you this rattled, best to share it so I can be of aid.”

“I do not know . . .” At Poppy’s determined look, she sighed. “I overheard two actors plot a riot.”

“A riot? Against the theatre? How diabolical. Are you sure they weren’t simply rehearsing?”

“One does not rehearse in hushed whispers.”

“Valid point. Did you recognize their voices?”

“One man, I believe, is Mr. Jennings. The other I do not know, but I’ll recognize his voice should I hear it again.”

“What about the manager of the theatre? Have you reported what you overheard?”

“This is no matter for Mr. Florence, Poppy. The man is more fragile than a fourteen-year-old girl. I sent word to Bow Street. Anonymously,

of course.”

“Matter solved.”

“That was five days ago.”

“And they have not sent anyone?” Poppy asked incredulously.

“No.”

“Perhaps you should send another missive?”

“That’s not the problem.”

Poppy sat up a little. “There’s more?”

Beatrix nodded. “I gasped.”

“You gasped,” Poppy repeated slowly, not understanding the immediate significance.

Beatrix nodded. “*Out loud.*”

Understanding dawned. “You gasped *while* you were eavesdropping?”

“They were speaking of beheading a powerful man, or perhaps they said entity. My mind numbed at the mention of beheading.”

Poppy’s jaw slackened. “At the risk of sounding like a parrot, Beatrix, did you say *beheading*?”

Beatrix nodded with a grimace. “And to be fair, I was not intentionally eavesdropping. I happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Or you were at the right place at the right time,” Poppy suggested and leaned forward to ask urgently, “But did they *see* you?”

Beatrix shook her head. “I ducked into the first available room and crawled behind a sofa. If they investigated the sound, they did not find me. But I’m scared.”

“Rightly so, though it is a comfort that they didn’t see you. While they may know that *some* female overheard them, they have no reason to think it’s you.”

Beatrix’s face fell.

“Do they have a reason to assume it’s you, Beatrix?”

“Perhaps. In my mad scramble to hide, my necklace unclasped. When I returned for it, it was gone. What if they discover that it’s mine?”

“Lord Above, that’s not good.”

Beatrix sighed. “It was my mother’s necklace, a unique piece, the only possession I have of her. Fortunately, it was the first time I wore the necklace to the theatre. A small comfort, I suppose.”

“Did anyone see you wear it that day?”

Beatrix shook her head.

“So they cannot know for certain the necklace belongs to you. Perhaps you are in the clear.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Why?”

"Yesterday, I entered my dressing room to find my brush, face balm, and my powder not as I arranged them. Someone was in my dressing room."

Poppy's eyes widened. If they had rifled through her dressing room, Beatrix had indeed overheard a disturbing plot. A chill went down her spine. Her friend may truly be in danger.

That troubled her.

Poppy made a swift, audacious decision. She had aided her friend back on Bond Street, she would help her now as well.

"You are sure Bow Street never sent anyone?" Poppy asked.

Beatrix nodded. "I'd have heard whispers through the grapevine."

"Well, if Bow Street will not look into this matter, and on the chance the men do suspect you of overhearing their plot, we must remove the only evidence that truly ties you to the scene—your mother's necklace."

"You mean steal it back?"

"Yes."

"How?" Beatrix asked. "I'm not as fearless as you are, Poppy. I shall never be brave enough to retrieve the necklace from Jennings. It might not even be with him."

"You are an actress, Beatrix. Some would argue that you are the bravest amongst women."

"That is different. There is no risk to my life involved."

"Perhaps, but you have me. We are smart, resourceful, and will be courageous together. I have no doubt, as partners, we will find your necklace in no time."

"But how? You aren't with me at the theatre, Poppy."

"Splendid point," Poppy said. "I shall need to be there if I am to be of any help."

"That's not possible. The theatre is not hiring at present. Your presence will arise suspicion."

Poppy's mind raced. There had to be some way . . . "Your identity behind Charlotte is a secret, correct? Even from the theatre?"

Beatrix nodded. "That is the success behind Charlotte. I use paint, powder, and rouge to conceal myself."

Poppy cocked her head in thought. The start of a bold plan sculpted in her mind. "What if we share identities?"

"*Share identities?*" Beatrix blinked. "Are you being serious? We look nothing alike."

"Oh, I'm wholeheartedly committed," Poppy declared. "The only way I can enter the theatre without rising suspicion is by being you."

"But you're not me."

"We are not *that* far off in appearance, Beatrix. You have taken great care to keep your identity hidden. No one will tell us apart

because no one will suspect you to be someone else. We don't need to look alike. We merely have to give the appearance that we do. I'll powder my hair and color my face. No one is going to look that closely."

"What about our height?"

"I'm an inch or two shorter."

"I've more curves than you."

"Nothing a few layers of material and some padding won't fix."

"Saints preserve me," Beatrix said with a shake of her head. "What of our voices? Even if we pull off the look, our pitches are not the same."

"I shall whisper and act as though I'm resting my voice."

"What of my performances?"

"We can switch places for those," Poppy said lightly. "Lord knows, the last thing I wish to do is take to the stage and sing."

"Even if that works, Poppy, there cannot be two Charlottes at the theatre at the same time. It's too much of a risk."

"There won't be. Since the rehearsals for your upcoming play is in the evenings, I shall take your place during the day. We can switch at predetermined locations and times. You mentioned once that no one enters your dressing room?"

"Yes, but my dressing room is in the main building, whereas Mr. Jennings and the rest of the performers' rooms are in a building across the street. I hardly ever venture there."

"I see," Poppy said thoughtfully. "Nevertheless, I shall figure something out when the time comes. I'm all about embracing opportunities."

"This is mad, Poppy. What about our mannerisms? If nothing else gives us away, certain quirks . . . even if the eye does not catch them, the mind will."

"You are overthinking this, Beatrix. Actresses act. I daresay no one will give me a second look. But I shall do my best to avoid your colleagues where possible."

"You are crazy, Poppy. You are aware of that?"

"Of course, and you are not the first to question my sanity." Poppy grinned. "You certainly shall not be the last."

Beatrix shook her head. "Let's say we do find my necklace. What happens then? What about the beheading? The riot? What if I am merely overreacting? What if I heard wrong?"

"You wouldn't be scared if you hadn't overheard what you did, Beatrix." Poppy leaned over to give her friend's hand a reassuring squeeze. "If it does turn out to be nothing, at the very least, I'd have lived a day in Beatrix Hale's life. Smashing, right? And if there is a sinister plot underfoot, then hopefully the embarrassment is enough

for Bow Street to look into matters they deem unimportant.”

“I still find it infuriating that they never sent an officer to investigate.”

“Lazy goats, the lot of them,” Poppy agreed. “Do not worry, Beatrix. We will get to the bottom of this.”

Beatrix gave a wan smile. “Will your absence during the day not raise suspicion with your family?”

“Fortunately, no. My sisters are touring the countryside with their husbands and my father is occupied with matters of science. I am free at least until my sisters return to London, which, if I am honest, I am dreading.”

“Why?” Beatrix questioned. “They seem lovely.”

“As the last remaining unattached Middleton female, I can only imagine their meddlesome minds upon their return.”

“Do you not wish to find a nice lord to marry?”

A *nice* lord.

There had been a time Poppy had wanted exactly that. Fall in love with a *nice* lord and live happily ever after. But too much had happened since those days.

For one, she had nearly perished in a fire two years ago after helping her cousin, Belle, and the Shaw brothers save a lady from an abusive husband. A smidgeon of black powder might have been involved. Well, a whole lot more than a smidgeon had been involved.

Nevertheless, if it hadn’t been for James Shaw, Poppy would have been trapped in a building consumed with flames. He had rushed into the blazing danger and saved her life.

The point being, nothing changed priorities quite like a near-death experience. Not that Poppy did not want to live happily ever after any longer. Quite the contrary, she still wanted those things. But somehow, somewhere, the lens through which she regarded the world had changed. Her life felt different. Her dreams small. Almost as if they had dislodged from her current self. As though a vital part of her being had displaced that fateful day and she hadn’t been able to fit it back together again.

“It’s not that I do not wish to marry,” Poppy finally said. “My expectations have changed over the last two years. I wish my life to have impact.”

Beatrix nodded. “What are your expectations now?”

“That, not even I know.”

Her friend arched a brow.

Of course, Poppy could not expect Beatrix to understand when she did not understand it herself. To Beatrix, any advantageous match that would elevate her position in society, regardless of the man, ought to be snatched eagerly. Romance and love were for the books.

Not so for Poppy. Her parents had loved each other deeply before her mother's death, leaving her father to raise three daughters on his own. Poppy glimpsed that love in her father even to this day. And she wanted no less. Sadly, having stared death in the face, she felt nothing short of ill when faced with society's gentlemen of leisure.

Poppy had one life.

She wanted to make the most of every second.

"Well, if one has no expectations," Beatrix said, "one can have no disappointments, I suppose. Seems rather liberating, does it not?"

"An intriguing thought." Poppy paused, allowing a grin to spread on her lips. "What should I expect from impersonating an actress, I wonder."

"To get caught."

Poppy laughed. "Do not be so quick to doubt my abilities, Beatrix. I am quite good at acting."

"We shall see," Beatrix said, her lips lifting at the corners. "As for your expectations, all advice I can give you is this: Do not settle for anything less than what your heart desires. Lord knows it is hard enough to follow your dreams as it is."

"Words to live by," Poppy agreed. "Honestly, this is just the challenge I need to give my life some perspective. Tell me what being you will entail."

Beatrix scrunched her brows in thought. "You will be required to practice your scenes before rehearsals start. As you know, I have my own dressing room, so I am rarely bothered. Snooping around Jennings will be noticed. I've hardly ever spoken to the man."

"There is always a first time, right? I promise to be subtle."

Beatrix smiled in answer. "Your subtle is not the same as my subtle."

Poppy harrumphed. "What can you tell me about Jennings?"

"He keeps to himself."

"That is *all* you can tell me?"

"Well, yes," Beatrix murmured. She took a sip of tea. "I keep to myself as well."

"That, at least, is the marvel of the theatre. You are always acting even when you are not."

"I suppose." She thought for a moment. "If anyone questions the change, merely say you are rehearsing. You might also have to elude Hargrove."

Poppy furrowed her gaze. "That lout? I thought he is no longer a concern? He is still trailing after you?"

"I'm afraid so. But I've learned to manage him."

Poppy inwardly groaned. Of course, the rat was still hounding Beatrix, or rather Charlotte. She shuddered. The man was slimy and

determined. Poppy vowed she would rid Beatrix of that nuisance once and for all.

Then you are truly doing this? The thought intruded on her rant about Hargrove. Was she indeed going to pretend to be an actress to retrieve a necklace and help a friend?

Of course, I am.

Poppy shoved the part of her conscience that held lingering doubts into a box. She would be lying if she said she was not intrigued and thoroughly excited. The prospect of experiencing the life of an actress was thrilling.

“We are truly doing this?” Beatrix asked, echoing Poppy’s thoughts.

Poppy nodded, reaching for a lemon cake. “Yes.” She took a bite and savored the sweetness. “What could go wrong?”

Chapter 2

At the same time somewhere else in Mayfair

“I have a lead on Walker.”

James Shaw, the second son to the Late Duke of Wolverton, looked up from his newspaper as his twin brother, Derek Shaw, strode into the dining room. Older by four minutes, one would think that the current Duke of Wolverton would have been waited on hand and foot. That was not the case with his brother, and certainly not with himself. Theirs was a title, and family line, they did not acknowledge.

“You have a lead?” That phrase must have left Derek’s lips every day over the last fortnight and did not inspire much hope in James. “How reliable?”

“As reliable as they come.”

James set the paper aside. “Meaning the odds of finding a whole lot of nothing is almost guaranteed.”

“Each clue is still worth investigating for the minuscule chance the lead turns over Walker,” Derek said, sinking into a chair at the head of the table and helping himself to a steaming cup of brew.

“Where is this clue leading?” James asked. Fatigue circled his brother’s eyes, and James wondered what else was keeping Derek up at night. They had no active cases except for Walker’s.

“Regent Theatre.”

“The theatre? Not very inconspicuous. Lots of eyes for a man in hiding.”

“That or a stroke of brilliance. The intelligence of the source suggests he may be disguised as an employee.”

“That is less helpful. Do you know how many damn people are employed by a theatre at any given time? The entire lead smells of *shite*. And we don’t know what Walker looks like except for a myriad of sketches that depicts Walker as a cloaked hunchback figure with a beard that reaches his knees.”

Derek sighed, a notable sign of his brother’s frustration not often glimpsed. “Paranoia is festering at Home Office. We need Walker found.”

They’d sooner find a needle in a bloody haystack.

But on the chance the lead brought them one step closer to Walker, then it was worth a shot. The man was a radical, stirring up trouble wherever he went. The last riot he led, forty people perished by the hands of the detached cavalry and officers charging the crowd. Their current sources indicated Walker was about to stage another riot, this

one twice as big as the last. The radical orator had impressively eluded arrest for the past twelve months, and it was becoming a point of embarrassment to Home Office.

A more significant point of concern and the reason Home Office stepped in and appointed Derek and James to find the man, was Walker, the bold bastard, had recently started to threaten mutiny to the members of the House of Commons.

James had to hand it to the man, he had a big set of balls.

And he was as slippery as an eel.

"Do you know under what name Walker is supposedly hiding behind?" James asked.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be here."

James raised a thick brow. "Prickly, are you?"

"This entire affair is a pain in my ass."

On that, they were in agreement. "A dubious lead is better than no lead, I suppose." James sat back in his chair. "Who is the source?"

Derek sighed again. "An unknown missive sent to Bow Street."

James cursed. "It's a waste of bloody time."

"Normally, I would agree. The tone of the message, however, gave me pause."

"The source is not valid. This could be a trap. Or smoke. Why do you think this is Walker?"

Derek fished the note from his pocket and slid it across the table to James, who snatched up the small piece of paper and read its contents out loud.

"Dear Officers of Bow Street, I have reason to suspect a sinister plot is stirring behind the walls of the Regent Theatre. A certain Mr. Jennings and an unknown employee of this theatre were overheard by this author discussing the details of an imminent riot on what they referred to as HC. Please investigate."

"Signed, a concerned citizen," Derek finished.

Derek had been right; there was something about the tone of the message that gave James pause too. Also, they already knew a riot was imminent, and whoever penned this note explicitly stated the word. It was too much of a coincidence. Perhaps *too* much.

James looked up at his brother. "Well hell."

"My sentiment exactly." Derek's eyes darkened. "Dated four days ago."

"Why the devil did it take so long before this reached us? Parliament could have burned down twice by now."

"Crossed channels," Derek said darkly. "The missive almost did not reach us at all. By chance it crossed Hunt's desk."

James cursed. Marcus Hunt was a trusted friend and one of the few men privy to their dealings for the Office.

James studied the missive again. "It's a woman's scrawl," he noted. Derek nodded. "HC could stand for House of Commons."

James had picked up on that as well. He slid the missive back to his brother. It was the only lead they had. And by the looks of it, a fair chance this was their man. But in all James's years working for the Crown, he had learned to be suspicious of information falling into his lap without lifting a single finger.

And neither James nor Derek had lifted a bloody finger.

Could they just have gotten lucky?

Except James did not believe in luck. He believed in working for results—usually by lifting every damn finger.

"What's the plan?" James asked his brother, reaching for his coffee, which had all but turned cold.

"The author's testimony will be valuable to this case. You will infiltrate the theatre, locate Mr. Jennings and whoever wrote the note. Find them and, hopefully, we find Walker. Stop the riot. Carry on with our lives."

"Good plan."

Derek regarded James over the rim of his cup. "I've already found a way in for you."

"So long as I'm not a playwright."

"What is wrong with being a playwright?"

"*You* be a playwright and then ask that question."

"I don't have the patience or the charm."

"A playwright needs neither." James split into a grin. "He merely needs to grunt. Something you are quite accomplished at."

Derek ignored him, setting down his coffee. "I've reached out to the theatre. They are not employing any new staff but they are open for an investor. Seems one of their patrons withdrew their interest."

"I wonder how that came about," James drawled.

"I have no idea," Derek answered, blinking innocently. "He might have received a better investment opportunity."

"Right," James said. "Shouldn't be too hard to ferret out two mice with a bit of cheese."

"Excellent."

"Walker could be taking a piss on our intelligence," James pointed out. "This could be a trap."

"Or a distraction," Derek conceded. "I have men watching every inch of this city. The moment anyone stirs, I will know."

"The moment they stir it will be too late."

"Let us pray it does not come to that."

James sighed. He would be the first to admit there were times he hated his job. Crawling through piss-ridden gutters and getting chased down the street by drunken harlots took its toll on a man. And

sneaking through the burrows of a theatre surrounded by actors and actresses, searching for clues about Walker? He'd rather eat dirt. He preferred the high chase, guns blazing and swords drawn.

But not all cases were the same.

In the end, action-filled or not, what mattered was saving lives. That was why no matter how tedious a case became or how much a chase took its toll, the sense of pride and accomplishment when they caught the villain made every minute of hell worth it.

"You ever feel you are getting too old for this spy business?" James asked his brother.

"I am not a spy."

"Agent of the crown, then."

"Not that either."

James scowled. "You are not a journalist, Derek. Field operator. Working for the Crown. Same thing. Do you ever think we're getting too old?"

"You feel old?"

"Only when my joints crack in the morning as I get out of bed."

Derek arched a brow. "What would you do if you retired?"

"Haven't thought about life after this."

"You'd return to the field within a week," Derek predicted.

James grunted. Maybe. Maybe not. He *would* be bored to tears within days. That did not mean he had to chase criminals down Piccadilly in the dead of night. There were other things he could do with his time.

James just wasn't sure what. He also wasn't sure why the hell his brain had traveled so far beyond the topics of conversation that he was usually comfortable with.

An unbidden image of a woman trespassed in his mind. Blond. Deep ocean eyes. Pert little nose. He shook his head and forced her back into the mental box she had slipped out of labeled *Off Limits*. It was a box dedicated to all the things that distracted James from his cases. Sometimes, like with her, it even made him doubt the course he had chosen for his life.

He slammed and sealed the lid shut.

"I received word from our solicitor."

James glanced at Derek. "About?"

His brother's jaw firmed a fraction before he said, "Aunt Madeline."

"Bloody hell. What about her?"

"She's returning to London."

James cursed. Madeline Shaw, sister to the late Duke of Wolverton, had run off to Russia after the duke had committed suicide mere hours after discovering his wife, James's mother, had taken her own life. She

had abandoned James and Derek to face the speculation and scandal alone. They had only been seventeen at the time.

Fortunately, with the help of their father's man of affairs and solicitor, they had created a new life for themselves, one away from the rumors and gossip their parents had brought on them by their selfishness.

James dismissed the painful memories that rattled the box—this one labeled *Taboo*—he had shoved them into fifteen years ago.

"What the hell does that have to do with us?" James demanded.

"She seeks an audience."

"No." Absolutely not.

In light of their family devastation, James and Derek had shed the skin of their former life and all that came with it. The sacrifice hadn't been all that hard since they had not fully entered society back then. After their aunt left, they never did. Now, after fifteen years of absence, the title of Wolverton had grown into a myth. They were simply known as Derek and James Shaw. The Shaw Brothers. Rich. Mysterious. Tolerated.

No one recognized them as heir and spare of Wolverton. Not even their Eton classmates. But then, they'd filled out since then. Had become harder. Meaner. And they'd made sure that there was nothing to link them to a former, pampered life.

"I thought you'd say that," Derek answered.

"Didn't she marry a Count? Lexivich Demi-something."

"Count Alexandrovich Nikita Demikov. He recently passed away. Bad heart, I'm told."

"Christ, our family is cursed."

"They had two sons," Derek continued. "Twins. One perished at birth, the other is strong and healthy."

James swore beneath his breath.

"I see you understand."

"This changes matters," James said. "We swore to end the family line with us. If Madeline has a son, he stands to inherit your title."

"I bloody well understand what it means."

"A half-Brit half-Russian Wolverton. That ought to have society ablaze with titters."

James chuckled at his brother's glare. "Well, I cannot say I'm all that surprised. Madeline was bound to birth offspring in her marriage. I just never quite thought about what would happen if her child was a boy."

"Neither did I."

"You could always reenter society. Take a wife," James suggested, gauging his brother's answer by the slight twitch of his left eye. He loathed the idea.

“Not happening,” Derek confirmed.

“Society or the wife?” James teased.

“Both.”

James nodded. Too much time had passed. They were content with their lives. No need for that to change. No need to reach beyond what they had made of themselves. Neither of them would be happy living a life driven by leisure.

But . . .

“If Madeline is returning from Russia, the truth may come to light,” James pointed out.

“She has not seen us in fifteen years.”

“She will put the pieces together.”

“I’ll handle Madeline.”

“Meaning you will present her with your stoniest look and expect her to fall into line?”

Derek said nothing.

“You really *are* planning to meet with her. Do you think it’s wise to rip open old wounds?”

“She already ripped it open by reaching out.” Derek rubbed his temples. “I do not plan to meet with her in any official fashion. I’ll communicate through our solicitor.”

“She won’t accept that. Not while Shaw blood runs through her veins.”

“That’s not my problem. We will see what she wants and then go from there.”

James nodded. The matter appeared to weigh heavily on his brother’s mind. His too. He felt the same as Derek. It bothered him—the sudden return of their aunt. She was an uncertain variable. And James didn’t trust anything he was uncertain about.

“Very well, in the meanwhile, I will investigate the lead,” James said, tapping his finger on the note. Locate Jennings and find the author. Elementary. “But if it turns out to be nothing more than a dancer setting her lover up for revenge, you will be picking up my tab at Boodle’s for the next quarter.”

That earned James a twitch of the lips.

“Agreed.”

Chapter 3

A lady ought never to be caught in a compromising position.

Such were the words Poppy had read in the *Times* two days past on the subject of scandal.

Understandable, Poppy had mused at the time, though it was an ancient dictum assessed a bit too high in her opinion. Because what if an imperiling set of circumstances could not be helped? Did the *Times* know anything about being a lady? *A woman*.

Poppy thought not. Else they would not have published such an outlandish statement even though dozens of mamas and countless of papas must have nodded sanctimoniously at reading that one line.

The rule, if it could be called such, was indeed a complicated one. But one, Poppy surmised that was turned over by many a woman in the current age.

The paper did have one detail right.

Never be *caught*.

Poppy inhaled a deep, fortifying breath as she stared up at the imposing three-story structure that composed the Regent Theatre.

As of that very moment, she was no longer Poppy Middleton but Charlotte Rose.

Actress. Rising star. A complete mystery.

In danger. Maybe.

Poppy tugged at her skirts.

This certainly counted as a damaging set of circumstances.

But circumstances that could not be helped. Poppy refused to abandon her friend in her time of need. Her mission was simple: find Elliot Jennings, observe with who he interacted daily, and, when the time was right, retrieve Beatrix's necklace. Elementary.

She pushed through the back entrance of the theatre and found herself amazed.

The building was alive with chatter, people acting out their parts in the hallway, and somewhere loud, dramatic chords of a piano were being struck. No one took note of her, too involved in their own world of make-believe and stagecraft.

Beatrix must have done an excellent job in refashioning her, Poppy mused with smug satisfaction.

They had stayed up all night, both dressing up as Charlotte and working to disguise what seemed most out of place until almost no difference could be detected at first glance. *Almost*. To the perceptive eye, small nuances such as the curve of their noses might be easily detectable. But Poppy was confident her theory would hold. People rarely noticed those little things, too distracted with themselves.

Still, best not to tempt fate. She would steer clear of the theatre manager, Mr. Florence, and the owner, Sullivan Marks, as best she could.

A thrill shot up Poppy's spine as she made her way in the direction of Beatrix's dressing room. Beatrix had explained the directions quite thoroughly—straight down the hallway, up the flight of stairs on her right, fourth door to her left.

Poppy reached the winding stairwell at the same time as the swift clashing of swords drew her attention away. Curious, she followed the sound to a set of doors that led to a side entrance of the stage.

The Regent Theatre was no Drury Lane, but spacious and warm in its own right with a seating capacity of one thousand. Gold Corinthian columns, each framing a statue on a pedestal lined the walls, and two galleries and tiers of boxes swathed the auditorium in velvet grandeur.

Two men were sparring on a slanted stage in a mesmerizing dance. The opponents lunged at each other with surefooted measure—attack and defend, attack and defend. It was hard to tell who had the upper hand between them; both men were equally swift and agile.

One of the men had dark hair, a robust figure with strong, handsome features.

"You are off your game today, Eli," he said to his opponent with a forward thrust of his blade.

Eli? As in Elliot Jennings? Poppy studied the man carefully. She watched as he shrugged out of his jacket and carelessly tossed it aside before taking his position again. He matched the description Beatrix had given her, though he hardly appeared the dangerous sort. Soft sandy hair framed his face, and his eyes danced along with his feet as he sparred.

His opponent laughed. "A late night on the town, Marks?"

As in Sullivan Marks? The owner? Poppy had heard many stories about him. To Beatrix, the man was a genius.

"Miss Rose," a voice called out from the left-wing of the stage. Startled, Poppy's gaze flicked to two men she hadn't noticed watching the match.

They started over to her.

This was not good.

The man leading the way was tall and lanky. From his receding hairline and general demeanor, Poppy guessed him to be Mr. Florence—unless there was another man of a matching description that Beatrix had failed to mention. Not good at all.

Her gaze swept over to the man trailing after Mr. Florence. She had no idea who he—Poppy stifled a gasp as a set of deep, cerulean eyes fell on her.

Her heart turned over.

The man was tall, over a head taller than Mr. Florence, and his assessing gaze traveled over her with interest. His stride bled confidence even as his sharp, angular features held a discernable note of boredom. A strand of auburn hair fell across his brow, and Poppy's fingers itched to brush it back. His impossibly broad shoulders, clad in crisp attire, snagged her attention even as her eyes trailed the line of his dark trousers molding to his long, powerful legs.

Her eyes returned to his gaze, still on her.

No.

No. No. No.

This could *not* be happening.

He was here.

James Shaw.

In the flesh.

Which meant only one thing: Beatrix's message *had* been received. Shaw must be here on behalf of Bow Street. And if he was here, it meant whatever Beatrix had overheard was more dangerous than they first imagined.

Her heartbeat stuttered.

This was the worst possible scenario. Shaw *knew* Poppy. They had been introduced just over two years ago. More than that, this was the man who had saved Poppy's life when she had been caught in a fire—the life-changing fire.

Remain calm. He has no reason to suspect you.

Poppy said nothing as the two men reached her. Fortunately, she didn't have to utter a word. Mr. Florence, who shifted his gaze to Mr. Shaw every two seconds, launched into introductions.

"Miss Rose," he began. "This is Mr. Greenwich, our newest patron."

Is that so?

Poppy narrowed her eyes on Mr. *Greenwich*.

"Miss Rose is our theatre's most promising star," Mr. Florence announced before promptly coughing into his handkerchief. "A true talent."

Poppy inclined her head as she attempted to shift her gaze from Shaw to Mr. Florence. It was impossible. The intensity of his regard burned. Held her captive. She wanted to look away, even instructed her brain to stop being ridiculous, to no avail.

Shaw was big, bigger than she recalled. He did not tower, he dwarfed, and his focus was aimed entirely on her. Poppy felt like a rabbit trapped in the jaws of a fox.

The instinct to flee swamped her. She tamped the urge down. At least with Shaw here, no one will look too closely at her. Still, his presence changed things—they must retrieve Beatrix's heirloom as

soon as possible.

"A pleasure to meet you," Shaw said with a small bow.

Poppy inclined her head.

"Miss Rose, I am entrusting Mr. Greenwich into your care." Mr. Florence coughed again. "He requires a tour of the theatre."

Her head snapped to the manager. Wait. What?

Poppy cleared her throat, ready to protest. She was spared by a new voice intruding upon their group.

"Ah, Mr. Florence." Sullivan Marks joined them while wiping sweat from his brow. "Miss Rose."

"Mr. Marks," Poppy croaked in a broken whisper before she could stop herself.

He frowned at her. "What's wrong with your voice?"

Her hand settled over her throat. "I'm resting my vocal cords," Poppy whispered.

His brows never let up as his gaze lingered on her face a soul-wrenching second before he shifted his focus to Mr. Florence, who immediately sprang into dialogue. "The investor, Mr. Greenwich, I told you about, sir."

Mr. Marks reached out his hand to Shaw, giving Poppy a reprieve from his stare as the two men greeted.

"I was expecting your visit next week," Mr. Marks said to Shaw.

"Pressing matters prompted me to conduct business sooner."

Mr. Florence nodded and wheezed. There seemed to be a frog lodged in his throat. "I have procured Miss Rose to take Mr. Greenwich on a tour of the theatre. We have already gone over everything else."

Poppy's eyes narrowed on Mr. Florence as he once again prompted a tour from her.

No.

She couldn't be Shaw's tour guide. A myriad of problems arose at the idea. For one, she'd have to guide him. Poppy could barely conduct herself through the theatre. Beatrix had only explained the directions to her dressing room and where she could find Mr. Jennings's. Secondly, she'd also have to speak, explain things, and answer questions she did not have the answers to.

Lastly, most importantly, this was *James Shaw*. Even if by some miracle she could accomplish all of the above, Mr. Shaw was one of those men that missed nothing. It was his job to notice things—to catch any small nuances that were out of place.

"Miss Rose?" Mr. Marks raised his brow. "Are you up for the task? Eli can assist," Marks glanced around, "but he seems to have disappeared."

Mr. Florence coughed again. "I would not trouble Miss Rose had I

not been feeling under the weather. She knows the theatre like no other."

Marks did not look pleased but yielded. "Unfortunately, I have a meeting with my solicitor or I'd have offered. Miss Rose is the best choice."

"I would be honored to have the beautiful Miss Rose escort me on the tour," Shaw answered. That penetrating gaze pierced her again.

A shiver crawled down her spine.

Poppy didn't know what to think of him.

Marks nodded and excused himself with a lingering glance at Poppy while Mr. Florence backed towards the exit. "If you do not require me any further, I will leave you to your tour."

There was nothing for it.

Poppy was stuck with James Shaw.

She ought to leave. Now that he was here, the matter of conspiracy was indeed in more capable hands. However, Shaw did not know about Beatrix's mother's necklace. She hadn't mentioned it in her letter to Bow Street.

Even if he did, Poppy suspected a trinket, heirloom or not, would not make his list of priorities. It was the only belonging Beatrix had left of her mother. Poppy refused to let her friend down. She would conduct her search while Shaw investigated whatever else brewed afoot.

"Shall we?" Mr. Shaw drawled, brows shifting upward.

Poppy's mind snapped to attention. "Yes, of course," she said in a low tone, barely a whisper.

She grimaced when his frown deepened. He said nothing, merely stepped in line as she led him back the way she came. Beatrix had said the three houses across from the back entrance south to the main building were the theatre's offices and scene painting rooms. They also hosted shared and private dressing rooms.

Poppy sent up a silent prayer she did not rouse Shaw's suspicion.

But this man had once saved her life.

Drat if her heart didn't beat faster at his presence.

Twelve Jennings.

That was how many Jennings were employed at Regent Theatre. Five of them were women, reducing James's list of suspects to seven. Seven were still a lot of men to keep track of, so James had dug deeper. He was sure Jennings wasn't Walker in disguise, merely an ally.

So many unknown variables made James deuced uncomfortable. The mysterious writer of the message. An uncertain Mr. Jennings. And

between them, Walker.

As James had delved deeper into his list, he discovered two of the Jennings had not been at the theatre in the week the missive was sent to Bow Street. Another Jennings was too old and also too in his cups to fit the criteria of the man James was searching for, and another was deaf, which brought the list down to three possible suspects.

Investigating three men still took time.

Patience.

Effort.

James was starting to think his cover as a patron might only be a hindrance to this case. Miss Rose's reluctance to give him a tour, the shocked look she'd sent Florence was proof of that. It seemed that the performers either wanted to steer clear of him in hopes of avoiding his focus or they sought his attention in order to impress him because of his status.

James doubted anyone would dare to gossip and risk his ill-favor. His ability to gather truth then was limited. And Mr. Florence was of no help whatsoever. The man was as skittish as a newborn horse. James hadn't been all that surprised when Florence pawned him off on some poor actress.

James spared a sidelong glance at Miss Rose, who led him down the hallway and into the gloomy sky of the morning. She smelled sweet. Violets, he thought.

She slowed to a stop in the center of the road, and James drew to a halt beside her. He gave her a curious glance when he caught her staring up at the buildings, brows wrinkled.

"You look lost," James observed.

"Of course I'm not lost." Miss Rose eyed him askance and pointed to the red brick building before them. "These are the offices. We keep separate storage space and rehearsal rooms."

James suppressed a grin as Miss Rose crossed the street stiffly. He'd wager his monthly income that the uppity actress had never set foot in the rehearsal rooms with the other performers. Given the praise that came with her introduction, she appeared to be well spoiled—the favorite.

"Where is your dressing room?" James asked.

"In the main building on the second floor."

"Preferential treatment."

She shot him a glare. "As you must know, the true identity of Charlotte Rose is well-kept. Isolation retains my secret."

"A secret implies somebody else knows."

"Somebody else does," she replied cheekily.

James did smile then. Her posture remained rigid, but her lips fashioned a small smirk. He sensed her dislike, whether of him or for

being reduced to his tour guide. James put his money on the latter. He hadn't been able to take his eyes off her when Mr. Florence had first approached her. James had been riveted. Still was.

Puzzling, that.

The amount of kohl that lined the actress's eyes raised the hairs on the back of his neck. She hardly looked human. He shuddered again, recalling that first glance. Deep, black circles colored her eyes, her face painted whiter than snow. A ghost. She looked like a wraith that had taken strawberry rouge to her lips and cheeks.

"Do you always take such avid interest in performers?" she suddenly asked, drawing James back to the present.

"Where my money is concerned, yes."

That earned him a chuckle, the slight sound sliding over his senses, warming his blood.

James decided to take advantage of her lighter mood. "An interesting fact," he drawled, "there are twelve Jennings employed at the theatre."

"Oh?" she said, somewhat startled. "That is fascinating."

James went on alert. "You are not acquainted with them all?"

"I can't say that I am. I keep mostly to myself."

"Then you are not acquainted with David Jennings?"

She shrugged.

"I found Horace Jennings quite entertaining."

"He is a dear."

James cocked his head. "What about Elliot Jennings? He is the talk of the theatre, reputed to be a silver-tongued devil."

"You should not lend your ears to gossip." She paused at the entrance of the building. "Do you wish for a tour or not, Mr. Greenwish?"

"Greenwich." He motioned for her to lead the way.

Her smile lifted into a forced tilt.

Two giggling actresses passed them as they entered. Upon spotting him, they batted their lashes coyly.

"Hello, Charlotte," they cooed, erupting into fits of laughter.

Miss Rose said nothing in reply, only eyeing them until they moved on.

James shook his head. It was hard to tell whether Miss Rose merely took resting her voice seriously or whether she was conceited and unaffected by the people surrounding her.

James thought about what he had heard about her.

Nothing significant. Young. Beautiful. A sparkling *diamond*.

James scoffed.

Young, yes. Beautiful? Debatable. A sparkling Diamond? No. She reminded him more of a jagged piece of rock. And yet . . . there was

something about her. Something he could not quite put a name to. James found he wanted to wipe away all that paint covering her face. His gut told him there was something not quite right about Charlotte Rose. His gut was never wrong.

“Why are you resting your voice?” James questioned.

“For my performance,” she answered without thought. “Why are you so curious?”

“I’m a curious man,” James said as she led him down a series of hallways. Had James not been so preoccupied with what the actress was not telling him, he’d have realized earlier that for a tour guide, she was not giving him a tour at all, but merely strolling aimlessly through the building. But James was too busy puzzling over the pieces that comprised Miss Rose and how they fit.

“Have you been employed at the theatre long?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Long enough.”

“Do you always answer questions with vague answers?”

“I’m a vague woman.”

His gut tightened. It did that whenever she spoke. What the devil was that about?

“Have you noticed anything strange of late?” James asked and regretted the question the moment it left his mouth.

She shot him a curious glance. “Strange how?”

He shrugged. “Anything out of the ordinary.”

“Such as a new investor questioning about strange dealings at the theatre he invested in?”

James grimaced. “My presence is not out of the ordinary and neither is my curiosity.”

“Because you wish to determine the value of your investment?”

“Yes, I’ve invested a fortune in the theatre, therefore in you.”

She harrumphed. “I am a mere actress. Your question is better directed at Mr. Florence.”

James’s internal radar went chaotic.

The nonchalance in her tone felt off. Almost forced.

Miss Rose was hiding something.

Could she have been the one who sent the missive to Bow Street?

“No one knows the ins and outs of the theatre better than its artists,” James remarked. “Am I right?”

“I suppose.”

Another vague answer.

What a remarkably infuriating woman.

“Do you rehearse every day?”

A faint crease appeared upon her brow, but she nodded.

“So you were here last Thursday rehearsing?”

Her mouth tightened to a thin line. “Yes, Mr. Greenwich. What is it you are getting at?”

He frowned at her tone. “I merely wish to get a sense of every performer at the theatre.”

She gave a disbelieving snort but said nothing further, back straightening as she picked up speed. James easily kept pace, his legs much longer.

He considered her.

James doubted it was Miss Rose who'd penned a note to Bow Street. The woman did not seem to care much about her fellow performers. She appeared rather uncaring of everything in general, all except her voice. No, James decided. Miss Rose, the young, beautiful, and diamond actress did not possess the heart of a concerned citizen, but rather that of an unconcerned brat.

Chapter 4

There was something unimaginably unsettling about James Shaw.

He was too masculine. Too sharp. Too rough.

Dangerous.

Poppy wanted to sag against the wall and steel herself against Shaw's dizzying presence. Instead, remarkably, she kept her back erect and her posture poised as she led him through the building she presumed was for rehearsing.

Dear Lord, she had held up against his questioning. That alone deserved a pat on the back.

Steadily, the tension eased from her shoulders as they made their way through the maze of hallways, peering into each room with expectancy. Though she'd been resistant at first, Shaw, or rather Mr. Florence, had provided the perfect opportunity to inspect the layout and keep an eye out for Mr. Jennings's dressing room.

Twelve Jennings!

Goodness, did Beatrix know?

Poppy did not think her friend had realized whoever came to inspect her claim would have to investigate twelve men first. The last thing Poppy wished to do was impede Shaw's investigation into Mr. Jennings. The quicker the scoundrels were caught, the better for Beatrix.

They would need to pin another note.

There was, however, one snag to this exploratory opportunity. Poppy had to keep a low profile and not draw attention to *Charlotte*, something that was all but impossible with Shaw at her side. Eyes drew to him like bees attracted to the sweetness of flowers.

Her heart stuttered, unreasonably, at the thought that there were undoubtedly dozens of women who would go to great lengths to be on the receiving end of this man's attention. Poppy wasn't one of those women, so the feeling was wholly illogical.

Still, it annoyed her.

"Have you always wanted to become an actress?" Shaw asked her, his gaze casually observing their environment. Poppy still couldn't quite believe she had one up on this man.

She slanted him a sidelong look and shrugged. "All women are actresses, Mr. Greenwich. Charlotte is merely getting paid for her talents."

"You speak of her as though she is a different person."

"In a way," *more than one*, "she is."

"I suppose you are right, but surely not all women are deceivers?" His dubious tone made Poppy smile.

"You must be aware that all girls are schooled from a young age to perfect the talent of acting."

"I'm not, no. Aren't girls supposed to learn how to dance and embroider?"

"I shall pretend I did not notice your utter lack of knowledge on the better half of our species," Poppy said and shivered when he chuckled. The sound had a bewitching element. A quality that made her toes curl. "Take swooning for one," she went on. "A lady can swoon at will, especially if she wishes to escape a particular situation."

"You learn that at finishing school?"

"Not quite, but we *do* learn it. And we perfect it."

"Have *you* ever swooned at will?"

"Once," she admitted. She rubbed a spot at the back of her head. "I cannot say I will do so again soon."

"I suppose I stand corrected."

Poppy nodded. "Batting eyelashes is also an art. Even a smile conveys a particular talent at acting. The use of a fan. A gasp of shock. All those are tools in a woman's repertoire."

"A smile? A gasp? You seem to be living in a different world than I, Miss Rose."

"Not so different when you think about it," Poppy said. "Charlotte can sit through an entire lecture from Mr. Florence with an indulging smile even if her temper is straining. She can even attempt a coy smile for you, sir, and worm her way out of being your guide."

"Ah, but Charlotte is an actress, as is the woman beneath her."

"We are all acting in some way or another."

"Fake smiles. Fluttering lashes. Swooning at will. It's a wonder the men of Britain have not revolted."

"Why would they? Men are masters of the craft as well. They, you, merely operate on a different stage."

"I'm not sure I delight in the notion, though it certainly seems as though you have a point, Miss Rose." His lips pinched tight, accentuating the strong angle of his jaw. "I shall file the valuable information you've imparted away for future reference."

Poppy just bet he would.

They reached an area that Poppy presumed to be a common room of sorts. Four actors lounged on the sofas while a group of five women stood around a table that displayed two or three assortments of bread. She spotted Elliot Jennings reclining on one side of a sofa pouring over some pages—his scenes, no doubt. Beside him sat a lean, older woman, reading a book.

"As you can see," Poppy murmured offhandedly to Shaw, "this is the lounge area. Feel free to help yourself to some refreshments."

“I gathered as much,” Shaw drawled, a note of amusement entering his voice.

Poppy watched as he swept the room carefully, his gaze moving over Jennings without hesitation before it traveled over to the women, his lips quirking upward. Poppy narrowed her eyes on him. He didn’t appear to recognize Elliot Jennings as one of the twelve.

He must not have met Mr. Jennings yet. Poppy shook her head. That or the man was even a better actor than she first thought. She marveled at how quickly he integrated with his environment. And he had sounded so astounded at the comment that everyone was acting in one way or another. He must think he had her fooled with that ruse.

Shaw had no idea of the truth.

It was a heady feeling, Poppy mused, to be one step ahead of this towering man. But Poppy did not want to push her luck. The more time she spent in his presence, in all of these people’s presence, the higher the chance of being caught. Best put Shaw on Jennings trail and step away.

And now that she knew Jennings sparred with Mr. Marks, she merely had to determine what times they met and use that opportunity to search for the necklace.

Her gaze flicked to the woman sitting beside Jennings and then to the five women gawking at Shaw. The older woman seemed somewhat out of place, a little lonely looking, and Poppy felt instant sympathy swell in her breast. She knew firsthand about feeling out of place.

“Charlotte,” one of the girls called, sashaying over, eyes roaming up and down Shaw. “And who might this dashing gentleman be?”

Shaw swept into a deep bow before Poppy could introduce him. “Charles Greenwich at your service, madam. New patron to the Regent Theatre.”

Poppy rolled her eyes heavenward.

“Oh!” The girls erupted into giggles. “He’s a handsome one.”

Shameless, the lot of them.

And Shaw seemed to bask in the attention.

But Poppy knew better. He was simply buttering them up.

Wasn’t he?

Oh! Why did she care?

Poppy pursed her lips, knowing the answer and not liking it one bit. Senseless as it was, she was *attracted* to the man.

She did not *want* to be. So she would divorce herself from his company and curb that inclination. It’s not as though she held any animosity for the man. But he was a Shaw. And as far as Poppy was concerned, where a Shaw turned up trouble usually followed. That and Shaw was acquainted with her cousin Belle.

Poppy's family could not find out about this adventure of hers. Ever. They'd put her under lock and key if they did. Hence, she had to stay as far away from Mr. Shaw, and all the temptation he brought with him, as far as she could.

"Miss Rose has been giving me a tour of the theatre," Shaw was saying.

"I can give you a *thorough* tour, Mr. Greenwich," a girl with blond hair and a black beauty spot said, fluttering her lashes.

Shaw gave her an indulgent smile.

Poppy was certain if she rolled her eyes one more time they'd get stuck at the back of her head. "Splendid idea," she said snippily, almost forgetting to keep her voice lowered as she snatched the chance to escape.

"Charlotte!" A girl with red hair rushed to her in concern. "What is wrong with your voice? Have you taken a cold?"

The other women took a collective step away from her.

Poppy shook her head. "I am merely resting my voice," she said with a dismissive gesture. "Nothing concerning."

"Does Mr. Marks know?" A petite brunette asked, a sly note to her voice.

Poppy arched a brow but chose to ignore the woman's tone. She refused to engage in theatre rivalry. Though, risky or not, Poppy was suddenly glad she had the chance to run into Mr. Marks beforehand. Now, at least, she could rest assured her pretense as Charlotte would not falter on the disguise itself.

"Mr. Marks is aware," Poppy said matter of factly as the brunette sidled up to Shaw. She curled her lips and then forced a smile. "If you will excuse me, I shall leave Mr. Greenwich in your good care."

Shaw's head whipped to her, and Poppy's lips stretched a toothy grin before she ducked from the room and breezed out.

Goodness! Thank heaven *that* was over.

Poppy only exhaled a deep breath once the crisp morning air hit her skin.

"A moment, Miss Rose."

James stopped the actress with a slight touch to her arm just as she exited the building. She turned, those startled blue eyes rounding even as her lips pinched together in displeasure. Ah, so she didn't like that he followed her. Well, James didn't give a damn.

He hadn't meant to charge after her. Not when there were so many others in the lounge to glean information from. But devil take it if the chit would dismiss him so easily.

"I'm being pawned off quite a bit today." James folded his arms

across his chest.

Miss Rose heaved a sigh and fully turned to him. "You seemed to enjoy those girls' company."

"Is that resentment I hear in your tone?"

"Laughable, Mr. *Greenwich*."

The way she pronounced his name made James frown, but he swiftly became distracted by a wayward strand of hair that had fallen from her pins. He wanted to slide his fingers over the lock—a ludicrous desire.

He fisted his hands against the whim.

James could not deny that from the moment he had laid eyes on Miss Rose, he had sensed she would be a distraction. She reminded him of another troublesome wench, one he'd rather not call to mind. It had taken him months to get Poppy Middleton out of his head after he'd met her two years ago. He refused to have another woman hold his interest captive in the same way.

And yet every impulse flared to life in Miss Rose's presence. The impulse to protect. The impulse to claim. The impulse to possess.

The hair at the nape of his neck suddenly stood erect. Chills raced down his spine.

James narrowed his eyes at her.

He only got that feeling when he had a lead. And his gut was never wrong.

She *was* the matter at hand.

This woman held the key to an unsolved mystery. James just didn't know *what* mystery yet. But once he got a whiff of a suspicious scent, especially when on the job, he pulled on every thread until the entire riddle unraveled before him.

And, James sensed, Miss Rose had more than one thread to untangle.

He considered her a moment, recalling the way Marks's posture had changed when Florence announced she would facilitate his tour of the theatre. Almost caring. He decided to pull on that particular thread now.

"Are you and Marks more than colleagues?" James asked bluntly.

Miss Rose's eyes bulged. "I beg your pardon?"

"It's a simple enough question."

"I assure you, my relationship with Mr. Marks is above board," she hissed. "Which cannot be said for your manners!"

James grunted. "I saw the way he looked at you."

"I am in his employ! He was certainly not looking at me anyway other than that."

James knitted his brows. Miss Rose appeared caught off guard by his deduction. Was she in earnest or merely naïve? She seemed

thoroughly appalled at the idea, and yet, James had not mistaken the look of favor that had passed over Marks's features. Unrequited love, then? An affectionate employer?

James shoved the distracting thought aside. He was not here to puzzle over theatre shenanigans. And certainly not Miss Rose's intimate life. But the more James pulled from her, the more he wanted to unravel. He wanted to solve the mystery of Charlotte Rose.

Her eyes flashed with anger as she glared at him. "Not to mention, sir, whether your money is invested here or not, who I keep company with is none of your concern."

Not if you wrote that missive, Miss Rose.

"That is a matter for debate."

"Are you always this infuriating?"

"Yes."

She cast her gaze heavenward. "I do not consort with members of the cast or staff." She eyed him up and down. "Or patrons, for that matter."

"It must be a lonely existence."

Her eyes darkened, and James cursed when her gaze turned speculative. Not the thoughtful kind, either. Frosty. Her reluctance, he should say, to consort with him, was as clear as day.

Dammit, he needed her on his side, not set her against him. Charlotte Rose was the key. He was sure of it.

"I have never felt lonely," she snapped after a short pause, then made an effort to shrug. "At least not when at the theatre."

"I admire your strength then. Most women would have been frightened to be alone."

"I am not alone."

"Neither are you frightened," he observed. His eyes pinned her in place. Watching. Searching. Seeing everything and nothing at all. The actress was a conundrum. She seemed cold, but he sensed only warmth. She appeared unconcerned, yet he felt her compassion. What the bloody hell was going on?

"Fear is good," she said smartly. "Fear keeps you vigilant."

"There is a difference between fear and being frightened."

She huffed out a breath in answer. James did not miss the slight twitch of her eye. Annoyance. All the white paint in the world could not hide that little action from his gaze.

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Greenwich, I must go over the notes of my scene now."

James nodded absently, watching as she sashayed back to the main building and disappeared from his view. He still had several Jennings to search out and an elusive author to find.

It was a bloody wonder someone had sent that missive to Bow

Street at all. Theatre communities were tight communities. Whoever penned the note would never come out and fess up.

Could Miss Rose have blown the gaff on Jennings?

James wished he could ask the wily actress directly. But that would expose his cover, and whether Miss Rose consorted with her fellow performers or not, he doubted she would snitch on any one of them.

But one irrevocable fact settled in his blood—Charlotte Rose was hiding something. And she had just moved to the top of his lists of suspects.

Chapter 5

James wanted to throttle someone. The feeling never came unjustified. At least, not usually. Not without a series of grim events that led to his blood simmering for a good while first. But today was not the usual day it seemed.

An image popped into his mind, one of Miss Rose's lips, pink and luscious, ripe for the plucking. It wreaked havoc with the hard-wiring of nerves that connected the sane part of his brain—the part that was focused on the words his brother had just relayed. And it did nothing to ease his fury. In fact, it further spiked it.

"*They did what?*" James sputtered, barely containing the bite of egg in his mouth. He swallowed. Then cursed. He set his fork down onto his plate. "When?"

Derek flicked a card wedged between his fingers with a snap. "The news arrived last night."

James snatched the note from his brother's hand, eyes darting over the two words scrawled in bold, confident, *woman's* penmanship.

"Son of a bitch."

"My exact thoughts."

"Why the hell did you not send for me sooner?" James snapped.

He had spent the better part of yesterday in idle conversation with every bloody actress at the Theatre. Every last one of them had grated on his nerves. So much so, he had ended his day at Boodle's.

James could not see any of them penning a missive to Bow Street. None of them exhibited any markers of anxiety or fear. No indication that they'd overheard a suspicious plot which had troubled them enough to rat out Jennings. Their behavior seemed entirely *in place*. So much so that each giggle, each coy look, grew more stifling until James thought he'd suffocate.

Dammit!

Within the first three seconds, James had known he would get nowhere with the actresses. He knew too that repeating questions and demanding answers that weren't vague and repetitive would raise suspicion. All he had discovered, he thought bitterly, was that David Jennings snuck around with the shop girl, Elliot Jennings could wield a sword, and Horace Jennings enjoyed his snuff.

Most of the theatre's employees—actors and actresses alike—had merely clamored for James's attention.

All except Charlotte Rose.

She did not clamor. She did not eagerly spill nonsense or petty news. Oh, no, the little actress had been too thoroughly annoyed at his presence. And he'd been thoroughly drawn in by her. More aptly, he'd

been twisted in knots over her, his cravat feeling as if it pulled tighter and tighter as each second passed.

"I did not want to interrupt your investigation," Derek said. "We still don't know who sent the missive," a moment of silence, "or the card."

James met his brother's gaze. "You compared the penmanship?"

"It's not the same woman."

James flicked the card over between his fingers. "What the bloody hell does this mean?" The answer flashed through his mind even before his brother replied.

"There are two women."

Bloody hell. "How can there be two women? Does that even make sense? I spoke to every single female at the theatre. I'm telling you, Derek, not a single one of them exhibited markers of anxiety."

"*This* woman sent the card directly to our home, James."

Shite.

"My identity has been compromised." James dragged a hand through his hair. "Everlasting hell. Who the bloody hell is she?"

He peered at the card again, the bold scroll *Elliot Jennings* neatly pinned between its corners. Someone at the theatre knew he was investigating Jennings, and that he was decidedly not Greenwich.

"Whoever they are, they have the upper hand."

"Unacceptable."

"Agreed."

James scowled. He had pulled on more than one thread and one of them seemed to have unraveled—but not in the way he bloody wanted it to. He needed to find the author—authors—behind these messages. Who the devil were these women? How did they know him?

No one had acted out of place.

His thoughts turned to Miss Rose.

Except for her.

The bells in his gut had tolled in her presence. Only her. Not even Elliot Jennings had aroused James's suspicion when they had been introduced.

James's frown deepened.

Miss Rose hadn't acted afraid. Or concerned. Odd, yes, but that could be vanity, James supposed. Her identity was a well-hidden secret, after all.

Two women.

Was Miss Rose one of them? James could not help but wonder.

He had brought up Jennings as a subject and mentioned there were twelve to provoke comment. She hadn't seemed to know much about any of them. Hadn't appeared at all interested in the topic. A ruse? James scratched his chin in thought.

“You have no idea who could have sent the card?” Derek asked. “Recognized no one at the Theatre?”

James shook his head in answer. He hadn’t recognized anyone he may have met before entering as Mr. Greenwich.

“Nothing on Jennings?” Derek pressed. “Elliot Jennings.”

“We exchanged a few words, nothing that had set off any alarms. He was sparring with Marks when I arrived.”

“Dammit, we need to find these women, James,” Derek said. “They know who you are. Know about Jennings. They know more than we bloody do.”

“I’m aware,” James growled. “Though they seem to want to help.”

“They don’t want to be identified either. It doesn’t sit right with me that they know about us when we know nothing about them.”

Neither did it sit right with James. But he had spoken with everyone at the theatre and the only person he had felt any form of spark around had been Miss Rose. Whether a spark of attraction or a spark of suspicion, no one else had set off any bells in his gut. Not even Elliot Jennings, which disturbed James greatly.

More than anyone, Jennings ought to have set off every nerve in James’s body. So why the hell hadn’t he? Was it because James had been too distracted with Miss Rose? James refused to accept that. He was nothing if not focused. Always. Yet he could not deny he was, perhaps, focused on the wrong individual.

James supposed it was possible that Jennings hadn’t set off his nerves because he wasn’t the sort of criminal that James was used to hunting. Jennings might be a reluctant pawn.

Which was why he needed to find the authors of the messages. She, they, seemed to be the key to this entire mystery. One of them had *named* Jennings. He was sure they knew more than what they had provided in their clues. James had to find them post-haste.

“I’ll look into Marks. Perhaps he is involved in some way as well. Have you noticed anyone acting suspiciously?” Derek continued his questioning.

“It’s a bloody theatre,” James said, flicking the card onto the table. “It would be odd if they didn’t.”

Derek grunted. “So look for the person not acting out of place.”

“First, I have to determine what that looks like. Whoever these women are, they are our first credible lead in months. Walker is making a move, and soon.”

“That bastard is nothing but a bloody ache in my temple.”

“Who could be anyone,” James growled. “How the hell do we have no portrait of the man?”

“We don’t even have his name, James. We only know him as ‘Walker’ and we’re assuming that it is, in fact, his last name. We

cannot narrow down our search without a name."

"Does anyone use their real bloody names anymore?"

"Names are overrated," Derek said in the way of answer. "You know this first hand."

Of course, he did. That didn't mean it didn't annoy the hell out of him.

James closed his eyes, one woman, in particular, coming to mind whose real name remained a mystery. A specific bit of conversation between three actresses held the forefront of his interest.

"How is your voice coaching lessons with Charlotte going, Mary? You seem much improved," Sarah-May asked.

"Oh, we are to resume in a week or so. She is resting her voice."

"Resting her voice?" Another actress said on a giggle. "Why is she resting her voice? She's never rested her voice before."

"Is that unusual for her?" James asked the women.

Mary shrugged. "It's the first time she had done so."

The first time she had done so. . . Out of the ordinary then? Or normal? Miss Rose told him she was resting her voice for the performance. James frowned. An experimental effort then? If not, why would she lie? Tutoring a fellow actress seemed thoughtful for someone who appeared to be so self-concerned.

Miss Rose certainly hadn't acted like a sister upon meeting her friends in the common room, James thought. She had behaved as if she hadn't been close to them at all.

Bloody confusing. His senses were all over the place when it came to that woman.

Not good for his line of work.

Neither actress had anything bad to say about Miss Rose, so James doubted there were issues of rivalry. Neither had there been any gossip about affairs. The only comment made about Miss Rose and Mr. Marks had been by Sarah-May.

"Charlotte is perfect in every way. That is why Mr. Marks favors her."

No one was *that* perfect, James thought darkly. Though, that had been the only cattiness James had picked up on. Women could become cutthroat when it came to something they wanted. James had seen this often. In his own family, even.

He grimaced at the intrusion of Madeline into his thoughts. Ruthlessly, he pushed it aside. He could not think on that matter now. He needed to focus on the task at hand.

One thing had become clear—Miss Rose *was* acting out of character. All he had to do was discover why.

It seemed James would have to revisit the confounding actress.

Poppy entered the theatre the next morning with her heart firmly lodged in her throat. Her gaze swept the empty halls before setting off at a brisk pace to her dressing room. She did not want to run into Shaw and his hawkish gaze, and prayed Beatrix hadn't either the night before. She had penned her friend a note as soon as she escaped her duty as a guide. Beatrix was to avoid Mr. Greenwich at all costs since Poppy had spoken to him and provided a tour of the theatre.

Lord, a tour it could hardly be called.

Luckily, Shaw had been too distracted to question her much about the theatre, and where he did, she had escaped with a nod or a shrug. The tour had been taxing, to say the least. In hindsight, knowing the man she was dealing with, she ought to have been more unnerved, but Poppy had been confident in her disguise. And thankfully, Shaw had no reason to seek her out again. Though his presence did bring a sense of comfort. She felt safe walking these halls knowing he was investigating the plot Beatrix had overheard. She had also dispatched word to him setting him firmly on Elliot Jennings's coattails.

That dealt with, she could focus solely on finding that necklace.

Poppy passed a small room where the performers gathered to break from their rehearsals in the main building. Jennings was not there. But the older woman was—the one who had been reading a book yesterday while the others had gossiped. Poppy ducked her head and quickened her pace. Yesterday Mr. Jennings and Mr. Marks had been sparring on the stage. She wished to ascertain if they were once again doing the same, and then she'd head to Mr. Jennings's dressing room to snoop. She would pretend she was seeking him out if anyone spotted her.

"Charlotte!" a man called out.

Poppy slowed, cursing her luck. It seemed avoiding people was much harder than she had first imagined. She turned to the caller and instantly wished she hadn't.

"Charlotte, I've been waiting for over an hour!"

This was no fellow performer. She recognized the man instantly as the same man who had chased Beatrix down Bond Street.

Mr. Hargrove.

She inwardly swore, too late realizing her mistake as she was swiftly pressed into the wall of the hallway by grubby hands.

Poppy tried to push him away but he held firm.

"I heard there is a new investor." He peered into her eyes, and Poppy recognized the jealous glint that sparked there. "Have you met him? I heard you gave him a tour of the theatre."

Poppy pursed her lips. "You hear many things, sir. Now unhand me at once."

Hargrove frowned. "Why are you whispering? What is wrong with

your voice? Are you ill?" He searched her face. "Have you lost weight, Charlotte?"

"Sir," Poppy croaked, suddenly uncomfortable. "I must insist that you step back."

"Tell me why you are whispering," Hargrove pressed.

"I am resting my voice for my upcoming performance, now please let me go."

He moved not an inch.

"I insist, sir."

"Must you always be so difficult," Hargrove let out in a moan. "You know how I feel about you."

"I know nothing of the sort," Poppy hissed through clenched teeth. "But that you are harassing me!"

"Harassing!" Hargrove exclaimed. "You feel the same way about me. I know you do."

"And how do you know that?" Poppy demanded, finding her wits. "I have never encouraged your advances."

His gaze dropped to her lips. "You are just playing coy for my affection."

"I told you in no uncertain terms to stay away from me," Poppy said, recalling Beatrix had told her she had threatened Hargrove with a harassment suit.

"You didn't mean that, Charlotte."

The man belonged in Bedlam.

He refused to accept no as an answer. Poppy needed to make it clear to Hargrove that Charlotte would always be off-limits to him. Beatrix, despite her cutthroat profession, was soft in nature. Again, Shaw's earlier comment on loneliness struck with bitter force. It must be lonely for Beatrix to some degree. Poppy could do this one thing for her—she could set Hargrove straight.

"Mr. Hargrove," Poppy hissed. "I am warning you. If you do not step back this instant, I shall scream. Then I shall declare to the entire world your inappropriate advances, and if I discover you sent one slanderous word my way, I shall have you beaten to an inch of your life."

His eyes widened in shock.

Good. He was not used to this treatment from Charlotte. Let the wretched man be astonished.

"And do not think I won't do it, too," Poppy pressed on. "I know people, Hargrove. Seedy people in seedy places."

"Charlotte, dear," Hargrove stammered. "Where is all this aggression coming from? I know you will never be so cruel."

Poppy made a mental note to have a long discussion with her friend.

“Believe it, sir. Now step aside!”

He staunchly ignored her command and lowered his head to breathe into her hair. Grubby hands gripped her waist. “Oh, Charlotte, I’ve missed you!”

“Sir! Let go of me!”

“Have we not played this game long enough?”

“What game?” Poppy snapped, pushing at his chest. “Stand-off, sir!”

He ignored her efforts to ward him off. “You, Charlotte, resisting my courtship. I cannot stand it anymore!”

And then his lips were on her, crushing, demanding, utterly repulsive. How many times had Beatrix needed to put up with this behavior? Stomach-turning, Poppy jabbed Hargrove in the gut and twisted out of his sickening embrace, making a mad dash for her dressing room.

Once inside the safety of her room, she fell against the door, breathing harshly and scrubbing at her lips. She cursed for not anticipating his kiss. Now she would forever remember that revolting man’s lips on hers.

“Miss Rose?”

Her gaze whipped up to find James Shaw’s big body sprawled on the sofa.

Double drat.

Chapter 6

“Dear Lord! Mr. Sh—Greenwich!” Poppy bit back a foul expletive as she nearly exposed her knowledge of Shaw’s true identity. But finding him in Charlotte’s dressing room directly after her escape from Hargrove frazzled her beyond measure.

As for Hargrove, if he decided to loiter around, she’d be forced to abandon her snooping quest. Though, for now, Poppy only wished to get away from the foul scoundrel.

“Are you all right?” Shaw asked.

“You startled me! I did not expect anyone to be in my dressing room.” Poppy glanced anxiously over her shoulder at the door expecting any moment for Hargrove to bang on it and demand entry.

“You seem out of breath. Are you done resting your voice? It is quite lovely.”

Her eyes widened, and she clamped her mouth shut.

Lord Above, why did he keep appearing whenever she did not want him to? She thought setting him on Jennings’s path would keep him occupied and away from her. Yet, here he was, his brooding gaze on her, assessing and suspicious.

Poppy shifted on her feet slightly.

What rotten luck. But then, she had a way of finding herself in awkward fixes.

Poppy cleared her throat and forced a smile. “Mr. Greenwich, to what do I owe this unexpected visit?”

He unfolded from the sofa where he reclined, the act controlled and thoroughly masculine, and rose to his full height. A sudden sharp charge filled the space between them, swamping Poppy with a warm, giddy feeling. His presence, large and powerful, filled the room with intoxicating flavor.

Awareness sparked within her.

Concern suddenly lit his brow. “What’s the matter?” he asked, his features sharply alert.

Goodness, the man was perceptive.

Poppy offered him what she hoped to be a sweet, indulgent smile. “Nothing is the matter. Now, pray tell, how can I help you today?”

Hargrove chose that moment to bang on the door.

Poppy shut her eyes and inhaled deeply. Repulsion quickened her heartbeat. Why had Beatrix not told her he had become so insistent? The man had practically forced his tongue inside Poppy’s mouth. This wouldn’t do. Not at all.

“Charlotte!” Hargrove called out from the other side. “Charlotte, I’m sorry! I should not have acted so brazenly. I couldn’t help myself. I

desire you above all else in my life!"

Poppy lifted her gaze to meet Shaw's. His jaw clenched hard as his gaze dropped to take in her appearance more carefully, cataloguing every nuance out of place from her struggle with Hargrove. Muscles rippled beneath his jacket as they tightened.

"A friend of yours?" he asked in a soft, steely voice.

A distressed laugh pushed its way past her lips. Poppy shook her head furiously. "No."

"What did he do?" Shaw demanded. "Did he hurt you?"

"Charlotte?" The pitch in Hargrove's tone lifted a notch. "Who is that? Is there someone in your dressing room with you?"

"Go away!" Poppy called out in answer. "I have made myself abundantly clear, sir."

Lord Above, she could not manage both men at the same time. Charlotte was widely known never to entertain anyone in her dressing room. This might careen Hargrove over whatever edge he stood perched on.

The banging on the door intensified.

"Did he make inappropriate advances?" Shaw insisted.

Poppy motioned for him to be silent.

His eyes drifted to her swollen lips, and he scowled. "He is a dead man."

Shaw marched passed her to yank her away from the door.

"No!" Poppy exclaimed as Shaw reached to open the door. He paused. She ducked past him and plastered herself between him and the door. He refused to move an inch. To say Poppy was wedged between a rock and a hard place would be an understatement.

"I can handle Hargrove," Poppy said.

Shaw's eyes drifted moodily over her face, resting on her lips. "As you handled him when he forced himself on you?"

"It's not what you think." It's exactly how he thought, but Poppy did not want to cause any trouble for Beatrix later. She could handle Hargrove. She could even manage Shaw. But not together. One of them had to back down, and in this case, it would have to be Shaw.

"Please do not get involved. I beg of you, let me handle Hargrove. He is a wretched being, but harmless."

"He doesn't seem so harmless from where I'm standing, Miss Rose."

"Who is that, Charlotte? Charlotte!"

"Please stand aside, Mr. Greenwich. Truly, I can correct the man's assumptions."

Shaw leaned close, until their noses were level. "There is something you need to know about me, Miss Rose," he said low, voice made of iron. "I never stand aside."

Poppy swallowed.

“Charlotte! Answer this door, or you will leave me no choice but to enter!”

“I will take care of this leech,” Shaw barked, voice harsh.

Poppy sighed. The man before her was hard. Unyielding. Stubborn to the bone. Who, Poppy suddenly thought, also provided a rare opportunity to rid Beatrix of Hargrove.

“You will do no such thing,” she hissed and stepped even closer to him. “If you wish to help,” Poppy began, knowing a moment of panic before instinct took over, “kiss me.”

A look of shock crossed Shaw’s features.

The doorknob rattled, and Poppy seized the moment. She gave him no time to object, but instead, she lifted onto her toes, grasped his coat, and pulled him down to her lips.

He stood frozen at first, his entire body immobile as their lips connected. This was for Beatrix, Poppy told herself, certainly not because she had wanted to kiss James Shaw since the day he saved her life.

He moved then, only the slightest of shifts, and Poppy found herself swept up into his arms as his lips roved over hers, demanding entry. Poppy gave it, eager to wash away the lingering imprint of Hargrove’s touch. His tongue swept into her mouth, gentle, hungry. He tasted of rich tobacco, and something else smoky and heady, but she couldn’t quite catch all the subtle flavors that made up this man, only knew that he overpowered all of her senses and any memory of Hargrove’s unwelcome touch vanished as if it had never been.

There was no denying that James Shaw possessed a reputation only the reckless were drawn to, and Poppy was feeling mighty reckless at that moment.

Then the door slammed open.

“Charlotte!”

Poppy wrenched away from Shaw, breathless. Their gazes locked, and a dizzy spell nearly claimed control over her. Poppy had the piercing impression she had jumped right out of the frying pan, into the fire.

Shaw pushed her behind him, filling her vision with the broad expanse of his back, but she peeked around him.

“How dare you manhandle her, you knave!” Hargrove cried, face so red, Poppy thought he might explode. For a moment, she worried Hargrove might attack Shaw. Did the man possess no sense of self-preservation? By Saints, he looked ready to pummel Shaw, who was twice his size.

“Who the hell are you?” Shaw demanded in a tone so menacing that the air sparked with tension.

“I’m John Hargrove, and the lady and I have an understanding,”

Hargrove declared. "Charlotte, come here. Leave this silliness between us behind."

Poppy's jaw dropped, disbelief leaving her speechless.

Shaw directed a questioning glance her way. "Do you have an understanding with this man, Miss Rose?"

"I do not!" Poppy exclaimed, stepping out from behind Shaw, refusing to hide behind him. To Hargrove, she said, "You sir, are delusional!"

"You heard the lady," Shaw spoke. "She does not agree with your suggestions. Now I suggest you remove yourself while you can still leave this room in one piece."

"Charlotte," Hargrove whined. "Please tell this ruffian to leave so we can talk. I must speak with you in private."

"That. Will. Not. Happen," Shaw growled.

"Mr. Hargrove," Poppy attempted to entreat. "You have grossly intruded upon me twice now. Please leave and do not bother me again or I shall have no choice but to make good on my threat."

"Who is this man, Charlotte?" Hargrove obstinately refused her request. She could practically feel Shaw shimmering beside her.

"I am her understanding, and if you don't bugger off this very second, you and I will cross swords."

Hargrove jerked back, his eyes widening. He turned to Poppy, and she inwardly groaned. "Is this true, Charlotte?"

Poppy slowly nodded, deciding to follow Shaw's lead. She was doing this for Beatrix, she reminded herself, and she'd already kissed Shaw. Lord Above, she had *brazenly* kissed Shaw.

Shaw took a threatening step toward Hargrove, face made of stone, and for the first time, uncertainty entered Hargrove's features. He visibly shuddered when Shaw flexed his shoulders, and with one last parting look at Poppy, he turned and marched from the room.

"Well, that was unexpected," Poppy murmured, frowning after Hargrove. The man possessed a hide as thick as elephant skin. It seemed somewhat out of character for him to flee like that.

James pivoted and glared at her. "What the devil just happened?"

"You met my die-hard suiter, Mr. Hargrove. Unfortunately, he has focused all of his affection on me."

"He bloody kissed you, didn't he?"

Poppy rocked back at the sudden venom in Shaw's tone. "I handled him."

"Handled him? The man bulldozed right into your dressing room. What if I hadn't been here?" He shoved into her space with one big stride. "And *this* is how you handle him—by kissing me?"

"The man is stubborn as a mule," Poppy admitted. "I saw an opportunity and seized it."

“A bloody opportunity. That is why you kissed me? Unbelievable.”

“Should there be another reason?” Poppy asked, dipping her head to the side. “Surely not.”

“Yes, dammit,” he growled. “You don’t kiss a man to keep another at bay.”

The light in his eyes darkened, and a dangerous glint moved in their depth. The fierceness of his gaze, the feel of his arms still imprinted on her waist, the speed at which her heart galloped—it was all too much.

Poppy panicked.

Hargrove might not be a problem anymore, but staring into the eyes of James Shaw, she sensed she had an even bigger, taller, more powerful trouble on her hands. One whose attention was firmly on her with an intensity that sent tingles down her spine.

She’d been brazen and kissed a man. Now she had no idea what to do in the face of that. It seemed she had two options: Face the devil and the implication of *Yes, dammit*, or run as fast as she could.

Poppy turned and dashed from the room.

James slumped into a chair of the library, remnants of fury still churning in his gut. He’d not known true rage until the moment Hargrove banged on Charlotte Rose’s door and he’d realized that the filthy bastard had taken advantage of the actress.

Initially, when she burst into her dressing room, scrubbing her lips, he had merely thought her actions odd—she was a curious one. But once Hargrove nearly pounded down the door, he immediately understood what she’d been doing. Since then, he could not entirely rid himself of the memory of it. He was pretty damn sure it was seared into his brain.

James was losing his deuced mind.

He never reacted to women this way.

Not true, a little voice sang in his head.

Fine, he had only ever reacted this way with *one* woman—a certain Miss Middleton—who was so far beyond his reach galaxies separated them. The life he chose had ensured that. But Miss Middleton was not in question at this moment.

Bloody Charlotte Rose was.

Why the hell had the actress kissed him and run from the room? Honestly, she’d *run*. Dashed away at full speed without looking back as if she had something to fear from James. Well, she did have something to fear from him, but not his wrath.

Not yet. Hopefully never.

Though she *was* hiding something.

Or up to something. Or merely odd. James couldn't decide which, and that made him edgy.

He was pretty sure the kiss had merely been an attempt to ward off her suitor even though there were a thousand different ways she could have managed the situation.

But then why the hell did her kiss feel like something else entirely? "You look out of sorts."

James jerked at his brother's voice. He hadn't noticed him sitting behind the desk, engrossed in a book.

Christ, even his observation skills were shot.

James scowled at Derek, who possessed the uncanny ability to read the energy of a room even while reading a book. James wished he possessed that ability at present. Then, he'd be able to conquer the confusion he was currently mired in. As it stood, he was distracted, unmeasured, and absorbed in the wrong subjects—like castigating himself for his earlier words to Miss Rose. He should not have said that she ought to have kissed him for a reason beyond handling Hargrove. And just who the hell was Hargrove anyway?

He drew a long breath and answered his brother, "I am."

"What happened?" Derek did not look up from the book he was reading as he offered the statement. For that, James was grateful.

"Nothing pertaining to the case." *I think.*

"You don't sound certain."

"I'm not."

"No luck finding the woman who wrote the missive?"

"I've spoken to everyone in the theatre's employ, all of them too self-absorbed to care about anything else other than their career."

"That's harsh."

"It's the truth." James sighed. "I'll have to compare penmanships."

"Smart."

"Time consuming."

"I'm sure you can enlist the aid of Mr. Florence."

"The man quakes in his boots every time we cross paths."

"You are a big man."

"Is that a note of amusement I hear in your voice? Remarkable."

A grunt.

"And in any event, I'm an investor. The man ought to be less skittish. After all, we *are* investing in the theatre."

"The Crown is investing, no need to sound so sour."

"Says the man not having to drag his feet through the proverbial mud. Florence takes skittishness to another level," James said. "In any event, I'm returning to the theatre tonight to observe backstage."

"You might tip Walker off."

"The stage is not Walker's podium. It's Jennings I'm after."

“You might tip *him* off.”

James shook his head. “I have a guise under which I can justify my being there.”

Derek cocked his head. “The actress.”

James shrugged. “I’ll be one of many men hovering for the attention of *one so fair*. No one will question my presence. I’ve already made my presence known amongst the women.”

Derek nodded. “Decent plan.”

“What about you? How was Brighton?”

“Uneventful.”

“Catch the smugglers?”

“Of course.”

“Not even so much as a chase?” James asked.

Derek shook his head.

“Anticlimactic.”

A twitch of the corner of his brother’s lip. “I know.”

Silence stretched between them, and Derek lifted his book and resumed reading. “Who is the actress ‘so fair’?”

James crossed his legs at the ankles. “What do you know about Charlotte Rose?”

Derek shrugged carelessly, eyes still on the pages of the book. “She is an actress.”

James sent the back of the book a heated look. “Yes, I am aware. Have you heard anything suspicious surrounding her name?”

“No.” Derek’s eyes lifted briefly before returning to his book. “Do you suspect she is one of the women who sent the lead?”

“She might be. I cannot say for sure.” James uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “There is something not quite right with that woman.”

“A bit eccentric, is she?”

“Something like that.”

“A mark of the trade.”

James pressed his lips together before biting off, “Bloody confusing is what she is. She is the only woman in the theatre that sets my teeth on edge, and yet she appears unfazed by her environment.”

“It is rumored she has never taken a lover even though she has scores of proposals,” Derek replied. “Men frequent the theatre just for a glimpse of her. Though, to my knowledge, she never receives any visitors.”

“Who would want to keep company with a woman who looks like a ghost?”

He did.

Dammit.

“Will she be a problem for you?”

James resisted the urge to surge to his feet, too restless to sit but not willing to give his restlessness away to his brother. "No, she'll not be a problem."

But the words did not ring true to James's ears.

Derek lowered his book and stared at James. The words hadn't rung true for him either.

James cursed.

It was a strange matter, the one involving Charlotte Rose. Each time he stared down into her blue eyes, a deep ocean of depth, he got the sense they had met before. Another sign James was losing his mind.

Damn Walker, James thought irritably. The man was more trouble than he was worth.

Damn their inability to catch him. It was becoming a point of embarrassment.

And Damn Charlotte Rose. She was the one causing all this confusion.

"Are you sure she won't become a problem?" Derek insisted.

"Yes."

Dammit, he wasn't sure at all. Because, truth be told, Charlotte Rose had problem painted all across her face.

Chapter 7

James entered the theatre that evening determined to find Charlotte Rose and demand answers. More importantly, to gain clarity for himself.

The maddening woman had him chasing his own damn tail. He was ninety percent certain she had been the one to send the warning to Bow Street. The remaining ten percent James contributed to the bewildering feelings the actress provoked in him.

And they were bewildering.

She made him question every suspicion, every thought that ran across his mind, even his bloody sanity. His instincts and her veneer did not match. He was not a man to blindly yield to what he could not firmly grasp, and, in this case, what he could not understand was the extent of his reaction to Miss Rose. Attraction, desire, lust, those were all things within the bounds of his understanding. They did not concern him. But what Miss Rose incited was much more than mere lust. He was fascinated with her on some deeper level—and *that* was too damn suspicious to thoughtlessly accept.

She must be at the center of it all.

Why else would he be this out of sorts over a woman? An actress whose face, along with her name, was unknown to him and to society at large. James loved a good mystery, but Charlotte Rose was not the one he ought to be focusing on.

Walker. *He* was the true puzzle. How was the man connected to the theatre? Jennings, yes, but what was their connection? And what the bloody hell did Walker do all day?

There were a hundred questions about Walker to answer and yet James still found himself on his way to Miss Rose's dressing room.

He caught her as she stepped over the threshold, shoulders pulled back and head held high as she shut the door and turned in his direction. James slowly came to a stop, eyes pinning her with his most searing look. He hardened his features, making sure his entire posture brooked no room for untruth. He wanted answers. He wanted them delivered honestly.

James stared incredulously as her gaze swept over him before she averted her eyes and passed him without so much as a nod in his direction. He had used this face many times before. Never had it failed.

He stood frozen for three full seconds before he swiveled and marched after her. He snatched her wrist and yanked Miss Rose around to face him. She blinked up at him, surprised, and he grimaced, marveling again at how a woman could use so much rouge.

There seemed to be more than usual covering her face, and an artfully placed patch right above the upper curve of her mouth. Her lips, usually a shade of soft strawberry, were colored a bold cherry. Her charms were on full display. James could not keep his gaze from dropping. Where had she been hiding *those* baubles? The delicate scent of orange blossoms made him frown.

“What the devil have you done to your—”

She twisted out of his grip. “Out of my sight! Thou dost infect my eyes!”

“Are you quoting Shakespeare? To me?” Another quirk of the mystifying Miss Rose? James shook his head, deciding to get right down to the heart of the matter and demanded, “What was the meaning of your kiss?”

“Kiss?” She seemed to hesitate. “You must have me confused with someone else, sir.”

Sir?

“I don’t have you confused and you well know it.”

“Did Sarah-May put you up to this?” Miss Rose asked. “I suggest you leave before I cry out for help.”

Bloody everlasting hell.

The chit had decided to pretend she’d never met him. Because of the kiss? The one *she* had initiated? What the hell was wrong with her? James would never understand women.

“Dammit, you are driving me utterly mad.” He narrowed his eyes on her. “Pretending not to know me won’t work.”

“I am not pretending, you oaf. I did not kiss you. I do not even know you!”

James scowled. He could smell a lie. This wasn’t one. Which made no sense. Was Charlotte this deuced good of an actress?

“You kissed me. Why? I want to hear the words straight from that pretty mouth. State the reason clearly.” And then he could move on with his life and stop obsessing over her lips. Rid his mind of all exotic fantasies that she had kissed him because she *wanted* him.

“I did not kiss you!”

“Do not play games with me, Miss Rose. I’m not in the mood for an act. We are acquainted well enough. You kissed me. I suspect because of Hargrove. Of course, there were a hundred ways to handle the matter, but you chose to use me, and now I want you to say the words. I want to know if I am right.”

Her eyes widened, and she averted her face, retreating two steps into the shadows. James would have none of the distance. He advanced on her, following her right into the shaded overhead.

“Why do you deny the kiss?” The kiss that had bloody set his loins on fire. That had launched a thousand fantasies. “Why do you deny

our acquaintance?"

"I . . ." her voice trailed off in hesitation before her back straightened. Her shoulders squared. "It's for the best."

"For who?" James demanded.

"Me, of course," she said and paused a full four seconds. "And you. I am not in the market for a man. I apologize for . . . *using* you."

James clenched his teeth. Whatever he had expected her to say—and he did expect her to *actually* confirm his suspicion—he hadn't quite expected the disappointment that swiftly followed. "So you used me to ward off that weasel, and instead of facing me, you ran off like a little coward. Well, done, Miss Rose. Such cowardice in the wake of such grand boldness. You are indeed a woman of contrasting depth. "

"It is best for everyone," she said weakly.

Not a lie. Not the truth either.

Uncertainty hitched in her breath.

James narrowed his eyes on Miss Rose. His gut tightened as bells chimed warnings in his head. Was this the same woman, shrinking away from him in the shadows, who had boldly kissed him? The same who stared him down with her fearless gaze? Granted, she'd run in the end, but he'd expected her to gather her wits and face him with the confidence she had since they met.

Devil take it! Disappointment settled hard.

What had he expected? That she kiss him again? While he wouldn't mind, he had not expected another kiss.

But to deny they had met?

That he never saw coming. It made no sense. He was a patron to the theatre, at least to her knowledge. That alone should earn him a measure of esteem.

James leaned down. "There is something you need to know about me, Miss Rose," he whispered, infusing steel into his voice, "I know when I'm being lied to. And I'm sensing all sorts of contradicting airs from you."

"I . . . I must go." She moved away from him. "I have a performance . . ."

James stalked after her. "How long has Hargrove been bothering you?"

Her brow furrowed. "I can handle Hargrove."

"Like you did today? Have you kissed many men in an attempt to ward them off?"

"No, it's not like that!"

James's shoulders loosened a knot.

Miss Rose had stepped out of the shadows, her posture rigid in defense. Puzzlement lit his brow. Her eyes, usually the shade of deep ocean, appeared lighter than usual, their slant more cat-like. A result

of how she painted her face for her performance? Her lips parted before she quickly averted her gaze.

James watched as she hurried down the hall to the stairwell that led her to the stage, brows deepening each passing second. Instinct drove him to her dressing room. His gaze sharpened as he pushed the door open and entered.

James swept the room with hawkish regard. All appeared exactly the same as he last saw the chamber, and yet the air seemed different, less charged. He stood in the center and shut his eyes, allowing all of his senses to draw in what his eyes seemed to miss.

His mind drifted to Miss Rose and the first time he had been introduced to her. How she spoke in whispered tones. She had appeared somewhat nervous, yet annoyance had soon won out. She'd also seemed cold and conceited. Not much had changed in view of that.

Who are you fooling, James?

Everything had changed. The actress he had met on his first day did not possess a cold bone in her body. Her kiss had been hot and sensual. Her temper feisty. His initial opinion, judge of character, had been wrong.

James pushed beyond his first, and second, impression. Her revulsion at Hargrove. Their kiss. The perfect arch of her brows, the sweet curve of her lips, the haughty jut of her chin. Deep ocean eyes. The sweet scent of violets he couldn't quite brush aside. He'd smelled that scent before. From before. From two years ago.

His senses tingled.

Remnants of scattered clues were snapping together as he inhaled orange blossom into his lungs.

His eyes snapped open.

The woman out in the hallway—that had not been Miss Rose. At least not the Miss Rose he had first met.

There were not just two women.

There were two Charlottes.

The revelation struck the same time a hard object crashed over his head. Disbelief registered right before oblivion claimed him.

Poppy tapped her foot in impatience as the hackney raced to the theatre. She chewed her lower lip, attempting to keep calm as panic pricked at her belly. Beatrix hadn't responded to the hastily penned letter she had sent about Mr. Greenwich. And if Beatrix hadn't received the letter, she wouldn't be aware that Mr. Greenwich was a patron—one to be avoided at all costs.

After what transpired at the theatre today, Poppy was certain Mr.

Shaw would turn up and force the confrontation she had run from in the first place. And if James sought Charlotte out, their ruse could be revealed.

"I am going to regret this, I am sure," she muttered to herself.

Poppy ought to steer clear of Charlotte in order to avoid suspicion, but Poppy couldn't laze about at home when impending disaster loomed. Kissing James Shaw had been a mistake. Poppy could not think about anything else the man's lips on hers now, or what he would say about her bold actions.

She pushed Shaw from her mind.

Poppy would require all her wits to sneak into the theatre to warn Beatrix in person. Hopefully, she was in time to catch her before Beatrix took to the stage for rehearsals.

The carriage finally rocked to a stop and Poppy hastily exited, dashing toward the back entrance of the theatre. She was dressed down in a plain gown of soft blue, enveloped by a navy cloak, hair neatly pinned. She hadn't used any rouge or face powder and pulled the cloak tighter around her. Fortunately, no one paid her any mind, her stride too confident to warrant attention. She made her way through the maze of hallways and up the stairwell that led to Beatrix's dressing room.

Only when she slipped into the room did she let out a deeply drawn breath.

"Charlotte?"

She swept the dressing room in a quick glance, her vision taking a moment to adjust to the dimly lit chamber. On the desk, a lone candle battled for its last breath. Her gaze fell on a crumpled figure in the center. Thick, dark fluid pooled at the man's head.

Is that bl—oh, no! No! No!

Poppy rushed over to James, sinking to her knees beside him. Her hands reached out to his head, hesitating, hovering just above his face.

Was he dead?

Oh, Lord, he was dead.

Someone killed James Shaw.

No. Lord, please. No.

"How can this be happening?" Her voice shattered on the last note.

Tears pricked her eyes as Poppy stared at James's pale, lifeless face. Currents of shock rolled through her as she shut her eyes against the blood matting his hair, seeping into his cravat—it was everywhere. A whimper left her throat.

Flashes of memory flashed through her brain.

Fire.

Smoke.

Gentle hands lifting her.

She shook her head against the sudden pain. This man had saved her life, and now Poppy could never repay him.

He could not be dead. He just couldn't.

With shaky fingers, she reached out to feel for a beat on his pulse. She had to be sure. Had to.

She could detect no pulse beneath the tip of her finger. Her heart crawled into her throat. This was the impossibly powerful James Shaw. Who could have done this to him? Mr. Jennings? The mysterious person behind the plot Beatrix overheard? Someone else?

Overwhelmed by dizziness, she moved to rise, limbs trembling. She had to get word to the authorities. A doctor. His brother. Anybody.

Wait.

Had she felt the slight throb? Or was it simply fanciful thinking? Poppy stilled, and her finger froze on the vein of James's neck.

There.

Slight. But sure.

Suddenly, the sounds of the world around her returned. Shouts and cheers jerked her heart into an irregular pace. She had to act quickly if she was going to save his life.

Poppy tore at her skirts and searched for the injury. His wound bled profusely. Someone had hit him over the head with an object hard enough to render this colossal man unconscious. She carefully wrapped his head with the torn material. By the time she finished, her hands were covered in blood.

Poppy had never before treated a head wound. James required a doctor.

But she could not leave him. The theatre would be up in arms if a *patron* were found in Charlotte's room unconscious. Her gaze flicked to the lock on the door. She needed to lock them in, now. She ran to the lock, turned the key, and ran back to Shaw.

How long would Charlotte be gone? She was the only one who could summon a doctor.

Poppy prayed it would not be too late once she did.

Chapter 8

Poppy shot to her feet as the doorknob rattled. She hurried over, leaning in with one ear. "Who is it?" she asked in a low voice.

"Poppy?"

"Beatrix." Poppy's shoulders sagged as she manoeuvred to unlock the door, ushering her friend inside. Only an hour had passed since she found James, and her nerves were already spread thin.

"What are you doing at the theatre? We cannot be seen together," Beatrix said, her voice trailing off as her eyes found James sprawled on the floor, head bandaged, and Poppy's cloak tucked around him.

"What happened?" she asked, then blinked slowly at James's still form. "That's the man who accosted me earlier."

"Accosted?" Poppy croaked.

Beatrix's eyes darted to her. "He accused me of kissing him. What happened to him?"

"Someone struck him over the head," Poppy said, clasping Beatrix by the shoulders. "Listen Beatrix, I need you to summon a doctor discreetly. I stopped the bleeding but he still hasn't regained consciousness."

Beatrix hesitated for a fraction of a second before she nodded. "The theatre's doctor is always on hand. He is discreet."

"Send for him."

Beatrix bobbed her head. "I shall return shortly."

It was the longest wait Poppy had ever endured. Beatrix returned a quarter of an hour later with a man, not a day older than thirty, who reassured the utmost discretion. He had inspected James's head and declared the wound not life-threatening due to James's thick skull. Poppy would have scoffed at that, she rather thought so herself, but her relief had been too great. The doctor could not say when James would wake up, however, his estimation had been three to four hours. Perhaps morning. He advised bedrest for a week.

"I do not understand how this happened," Beatrix said after they bid the doctor adieu. "Who could have struck him?"

"I'm not sure. At first, I thought it might be Mr. Jennings or the man from the conversation you overheard. Perhaps they had learned of Shaw's investigation. But the attack seems almost cowardly, not well thought out. It doesn't seem to be the sophisticated work of persons capable of planning a diabolical plot."

Beatrix scrunched her brows. "Mr. Jennings doesn't seem like a bad man, but then, I've learned men are capable of much more than we can ever expect."

"If he is involved in an underhanded plot, I'd say he is more than

capable.”

“I suppose.” Beatrix did not sound convinced. She considered James speculatively. “What was he doing in my dressing room?”

“Did you not receive my letter?” Poppy asked.

Beatrix blinked, then shook her head. “I have not gone through any of my correspondence. I’ve been too distracted by this play.”

Poppy shut her eyes and then opened them again. She pointed at James. “That is Mr. Greenwich, the newest patron of the theatre.”

Beatrix’s eyes widened. “And you kissed him? As Charlotte?”

“Yes. Well, no. Not exactly. It’s complicated.”

Beatrix frowned. “He said I used him to ward off Hargrove. What did he mean by that? What has Hargrove done?”

“That blackguard kissed me. *Groped* me.”

“What?” Beatrix’s shock mirrored Poppy’s horror.

“You should have informed me Hargrove’s advances had become inappropriate.”

“That has never happened before, Poppy, I swear. I would have warned you. Normally, I manage him without a hitch.”

“I barely handled him, Beatrix. Though I suppose it is a moot point now. What did you tell him?”

“Mr. Greenwich?”

“Yes. Well, no, he is not Mr. Greenwich. His real name is James Shaw and he is here because of the missive you sent to Bow Street.”

“*What?*”

Poppy nodded. “We are,” she cleared her throat, “acquaintances, of a sort. Beatrix, he cannot find out that I’m purporting to be you. How did you react to his confrontation?”

Beatrix’s face skewed in a grimace. “I fear made a terrible blunder with this Mr. Shaw. I might have given us away, or at least cause reason for suspicion.” She paused to drag in a breath. “I did not acknowledge him as I passed him in the hallway.”

Poppy’s heartbeat leaped at her friend’s admission. She was still shaken from finding James bloodied and unconscious. Now, this.

Poppy felt she had aged a decade in the last few hours.

“I denied the kiss. I denied knowing him. I thought he had me confused with another actress.”

Dear Lord.

Poppy’s pulse dizzied her as she fought for breath. She clutched a hand over her heart. James Shaw was a perceptive man. If he got wind of what they were up to, he would put a stop to their search.

Dangerous or not, logical or not, Poppy had started this quest and she was determined to see her mission to find Beatrix’s necklace through.

James Shaw would demand she cease.

She would not. Except, he may be able to force her to.

"This is a disaster." Poppy spared James a pained look. "I'm doomed."

"There's more."

Poppy groaned.

"I quoted Richard III."

"You quoted Shakespeare? Please tell me you recited something in the lines of *true hope is swift, and flies with swallow's wings?*" It was meant as an attempt at humor. Neither of them laughed.

"Thou dost infect my eyes . . ."

Poppy groaned. Of all the lines Beatrix could have quoted.

"And thus I clothe my naked villainy with old odd ends stolen out of holy writ and seem a saint, when most I play the devil," Poppy recited. It seemed appropriate.

"It's not that bad, Poppy." Beatrix's gaze traveled to Mr. Shaw. "What are we going to do?"

"Watch over him for now. See what he recalls."

A groan came from the floor and Poppy rushed over to James, peering down at his face. Relief swamped her when his eyes fluttered open.

"Who . . ." James's hoarse voice trailed off.

"Do not worry. I—" Poppy shut her mouth, recalling she wore no disguise. She whirled and gave him her back, motioning Beatrix over and pushing her toward James. Over her shoulder, she said, "You were struck over the head."

"P . . ." whatever he was about to say died on his lips as his eyes fluttered closed once more. Poppy moved to kneel beside him in concern.

"Mr. Jennings could not have done this," Beatrix said. "I left Mr. Shaw in the hallway. When I entered the stage, Mr. Jennings was already there."

Poppy thought about that. "His partner, then?"

"Perhaps."

"The only other person who comes to mind is Hargrove. In his mind, Charlotte spurned him and chose another." Poppy could see him ambushing James in cowardly revenge.

"Did you have to *kiss* him?" Beatrix motioned to James.

"I saw an opportunity and seized it. Hargrove needed to have his assumptions corrected."

"Apparently, they were only more misdirected if it was him who did this."

Poppy looked at Beatrix. Had she made matters worse by kissing James? "If this was Hargrove, he better pray Shaw is in a merciful mood when he regains his strength."

“Usually Hargrove is backstage after rehearsals waiting with flowers. He was not there tonight,” Beatrix provided. “I cannot believe that man.”

Poppy’s gaze drifted back to James. Things had taken an unexpected turn. A groping suitor. A mysterious plotter. A possible blackguard they hadn’t known existed. Nothing had gone according to plan. Poppy did not know how much longer she and Beatrix could hold onto their ruse.

James came awake with a sudden start to a knock on the door. His temples pounded in accordance with the ache in his lower back. His mouth tasted like powder. What the hell happened? A sweep of his surroundings established he was on the floor of Charlotte’s dressing room. The chamber was dark, drapes pulled shut.

James sat up slowly, a navy cloak falling to his waist. He lifted a hand to his temple, brows drawing together when his fingers connected with soft material wrapped around his head. Dizziness swamped him.

His brain a jumbled mess, James lowered his head into his hands and waited for the world to right itself.

Another knock.

“Miss Rose?”

James slanted a glance at the door. *Derek*? What was his brother doing at the theatre?

The knock persisted.

“Enter,” James said, his voice unexpectedly raspy. He cleared his throat.

“James?” The doorknob rattled. “The door is locked.”

James frowned. A scratching sound ensued and seconds later the door swung open. Derek filled the doorway. His brother’s gaze settled on him instantly, eyes flicked over the bandage secure on his head, the room, the bloody clothes disregarded in the bin. Something James only noticed when Derek’s gaze fell on it.

His brother approached him and hunched down to examine his head. “Rough night?”

“You can say that.” James eyed his brother. “What are you doing here?”

“You didn’t come home.” Derek slid an arm around James and helped him to the sofa.

“What time is it?” James asked.

“Past noon.”

“Bloody hell.” Where was Miss Rose? His mind fought to assemble the jumbled pieces. He felt like shit. And he needed coffee. Or

something stronger.

“Who did that to you? He’s a bloody dead man,” Derek growled. “Or woman.”

James sighed. “The events are a bit fuzzy.”

“Walker?”

James shook his head. “I’ve been poking around for two days. If Walker uncovered me, I’m resigning on the spot.”

“If Walker made you, we’d not be having this discussion.”

“True.”

“Where is Miss Rose? Is she keeping you hostage?”

A gasp sounded behind them, and James looked beyond his brother to see Charlotte had entered the chamber, her wide eyes fixed on Derek.

Derek rose to his feet. “Miss Rose, I presume?”

“I’ll have you know, sir, I saved Mr. Greenwich’s life. How dare you accuse me of holding him hostage?”

James hid a grin.

“Forgive my words,” Derek said. “They were merely a point of curiosity.”

She huffed and brushed past him. “I brought you water.” She thrust the glass at James. “Drink.”

James complied, watching her over the rim of the glass as he swallowed the crisp liquid to the last drop. He handed the empty glass back to her.

It’s for the best.

The memory struck him hard.

James scowled.

“Mr. Greenwich? Are you alright? The doctor said you should stay abed for at least a week.”

“I’m fine.”

“He also claimed you thick-headed. Seems he was right.”

Derek made a sound in the back of his throat.

James shot him a heated look before turning his attention back to the actress. He eyed her up and down.

This was Miss Rose.

And yet it was not.

What connection was James missing?

“Why did you lock me in your dressing room?” James asked, mindful of Derek’s presence. He wanted to demand answers and peel all the layers of deception from the little minx but not with Derek present. Not yet. Not until James knew what and who he was dealing with.

“I cannot have a patron found in my dressing room all bloodied. Rumors would spread like fire through the theatre’s gossip mill.” She

turned to Derek. "Just who exactly are you?" Her gaze flicked between the men. "Brothers, I presume?"

Both men stiffened, even though the assessment was fair. They were twins. Not identical. But the resemblance was unmistakable.

"Yes," James answered. "My brother became worried after I did not return home."

"And he came looking for you here? In my dressing room?" Suspicion colored her voice.

James shrugged, watching her closely. "I might have told him about you."

Surprise lit her features. "Why would you do that?"

"I believe you possess information on a matter I am investigating."

"What can you possibly be investigating?" She crossed her arms.

James couldn't be sure, but he had the oddest sense that she was mocking him.

It took a particular type of person to lie to a Shaw. They were big men and others were easily intimidated by them. But beyond their size, their countenance was also rough. Their overall presence brooked no room for half-truths and poppycock. And while James always had a charming smile at the ready, he had perfected, though perhaps not quite as masterfully as his brother, a mask cut from stone when needed. Those aspects alone had the loftiest of lords quake in their boots. Even the more predatory of the males kept a certain amount of distance between themselves and a Shaw.

But this woman, whoever she was, showed no sign of being intimidated by James or Derek. Her blue eyes remained bright and fearless.

Impressive, James mused. Just who the hell is she?

She was certainly not the Miss Rose he'd warned of his ability to spot a lie from a mile away. The subtle scent of violets prickled his senses.

This was not the same woman.

James rose from the sofa.

This woman neither backed down nor quivered in fear at his scowl. Not even with both him and his brother present. Not even when he straightened to his full height.

Indeed, she only lifted a roughly powdered brow when he did so.

Yet he sensed no deceit in her. No ill-will. Could it be she was merely protecting her identity? Which he was sure she would care to do, but James's gut told him that her ruse was about something else, too. A duplicity rooted deeper than the obvious.

Dammit.

He didn't have time to unravel the mysteries of an actress. Or two. Two women.

Two notes.

James did not believe in coincidences. He had found the authors.

One of them knew his identity.

James suspected *this* Miss Rose.

“Who attacked me?”

She held her ground when James advanced on her, only to be blocked by Derek from behind. She glared at them.

“How am I to know that?” she demanded, hands moving to her hips. “I found you unconscious, blood pooled around your head. I summoned a doctor and cared for you the entire night. You ought to be grateful. I don’t appreciate this . . . contrivance of intimidation.”

“You must admit it is rather suspicious that I got attacked in your dressing room.”

She harrumphed. “I find it more suspicious that you were in my dressing room to begin with.” One brow shot heavenward.

James shrugged. “You must have an opinion about who attacked me, Miss Rose?” James drawled.

“Perhaps I do.”

James crossed his arms over his chest. “Well?”

“Hargrove.”

“That sot?” James said incredulous. “The man doesn’t have the bullocks.”

“Who is Hargrove?” Derek asked.

“An admirer who feels . . . slighted,” Miss Rose said. “He believes I’m keeping company with your brother.”

“Why would he believe that?”

James swore her cheeks pinkened beneath the white paint.

The sweet scent of violets once more assaulted his senses, drawing more fuzzy memories to the surface. He scowled down at her even as his body tightened.

“Never mind that,” James said. “I refuse to believe that weasel got the better of me.”

“He struck you from behind,” Miss Rose said. “That is a cowardly move, which is why I suspect him.”

“I must admit, I’m relieved to find you no longer deny my acquaintance,” James drawled with the slight dip of his head.

“Yes, well, that was yesterday. Today is today.”

A memory niggled, but before James could catch hold of it, it slipped away. This woman would be the death of him if he did not keep his wits about him. James was sure of it.

Chapter 9

Poppy sagged against the door after she pushed it shut behind the men. Heavens! How grueling. Derek Shaw had been concerned enough that he had come in search of his brother, which meant their situation was more severe than Poppy and Beatrix had ever conceived.

Worrisome, too, that he had known exactly whose door to knock on first. He, and James, for that matter, had treated her with suspicion. She was suspicious, she supposed, but not the kind that they ought to cast on her for heaven's sake!

Poppy stared at her disregarded cloak with high indignation. She had saved James Shaw's life. Had guarded him against foe and death all night. She had set him on Elliot Jennings's path. Yet, today he had attempted to intimidate her.

Poppy could not tell whether Beatrix and her ruse was at an end. She could, however, tell that James Shaw suspected some form of misbehavior for certain.

No good deed goes unpunished.

She shut her eyes.

Had it truly been Mr. Hargrove that had attacked him? It didn't make sense for it to be anyone else, especially since it had been in Charlotte's dressing room. Another matter to investigate. But one she'd leave to James.

The room suddenly felt stifling. The scent of copper still tainted the chamber and along with it, the feeling of dread that wouldn't quite leave Poppy's breast.

James had almost perished last evening.

The thought of him dying had rocked her being so hard, she did not know if she'd ever recover from it.

Air. Now.

She rushed to yank open the door, jumping back as a towering silhouette framed the threshold.

James.

He had removed the bandage from his head and disregarded the blood-soaked cravat. He looked rumpled and wild, eyes burning with intensity. Even pale and injured, he exuded raw power.

He forced her to retreat a step back as he pushed his way into the dressing room.

"Mr. Greenwich? Did you forget something?" A ridiculous thing to ask in the wake of all that transpired, but those eyes that missed nothing pinned her as though for the first time, he saw everything.

Poppy's heart crawled into her throat.

"Something has been bothering me, Miss Rose."

She refused to panic. "Oh?"

"I should be dead."

"I beg your pardon?"

"At the very least, I should not be on my feet." His gaze drifted over her face moodily. "I was assaulted right after you left for rehearsals." He kicked the door shut with his foot. "It would, should have been *hours* until your return. I should have bled out. Instead, here I am, standing."

"Mr. Marks got called away for urgent business. I had an hour or two to spare."

"An hour or two?" He cocked his head, his scrutinizing gaze causing her heart to skip a beat.

"Yes."

"Lie."

She stiffened. "How—"

"Which doctor did you summon?" he interrupted her. "I'd very much like to express my gratitude to him."

"The doctor is employed by the theatre." Poppy saw no reason to lie. The man had been sworn to secrecy about her presence. "He is always present at rehearsals and plays."

"Does he have a name?"

"I'm sure he does. Mr. Florence shall be able to direct you his way."

"Do you recall what I told you last evening about the uncanny skill I possess?"

Poppy's heart stalled as she fought to recall everything Beatrix had told her. Nothing about any ability Shaw possessed.

Drat.

"I cannot seem to recall," Poppy hedged. "You said many things."

"Lie." He advanced on her another step. She retreated one. "You don't *know* what I said because you weren't there."

Dear Mother Mary.

He *knew*.

"What are you aiming at, Mr. Greenwich?" Poppy asked and steeled herself for the inevitable.

"There are two Charlottes." Another step. Another retreat.

Poppy swallowed.

"One who gave me a kiss meant to stave off a suitor and one who I only met last night. A Charlotte that smells of violets and a Charlotte that smells of orange blossoms." His gaze raked her from head to toe. "I'm partial to violets."

His words caused her pulse to leap. What did he mean he was partial to violets? Partial to her? Poppy did not know what to make of that.

Still, she couldn't give up *that* easily.

He had nothing valid. No concrete proof.

"Are women limited to one scent of perfume?" Poppy asked.

"There is also the matter of your eyes. Yours are deep and pure; the second Charlotte's eyes are light and clear."

"A trick of the light."

"No." His smile didn't reach his eyes as he finished, "If you had been there last night, you'd know to deny the truth futile."

"You suffered a head injury." Poppy thought she deserved a medal for keeping her composure this long. "And you have monopolized enough of my time."

"I'm not being dismissed that easily. Nor will I leave until I have dragged the truth from your lips. So, let me be clear. As I informed the other Charlotte last night, I have the ability to detect lies, no matter how small. So do not bother with them. I'll admit, you had me questioning myself for a moment, but now I understand why. The full truth is divided between two actresses."

Poppy bit down on her lip.

When Beatrix told her Shaw had confronted her, Poppy had suspected, or maybe she'd known, that their ruse would soon be over. There seemed no point denying the truth further. Thankfully, he did not know the woman behind the face paint.

Poppy crossed her arms. "Very well, you have uncovered our secret. Now what will you do?"

"That depends on how honestly you answer me."

Poppy lifted a brow.

"Did you write the card that was sent to my home?" Shaw asked. "The penmanship was feminine but different from the first missive delivered to Bow Street."

Poppy inwardly groaned. She had thoughtlessly given them away before last night. She ought to have known better than pen the note herself. Why had she not sent word to Bow Street? It had been a careless mistake.

"What does it matter who sent the notes?" Poppy asked, unfolding her arms to place them on her hips. This was ridiculous. Why was he centered on the notes and not on the content of them—as in the possible nefarious plot?

"It matters because whoever overheard Jennings and his accomplice could describe their tone of voice and other pertinent clues they might not even be aware of," Shaw growled. "It matters because the second author knew to send the note to my residence."

Poppy winced.

"It matters because you are not the real Charlotte since she is the one rehearsing in the evening. You also didn't know much of the

theatre when you took me on tour, which means the reason you are here, pretending to be your friend, must be because the two of you have decided something idiotic like investigating the matter on your own. That matters because you are disturbing *my* investigation with your sleuthing. And lastly, since the first note was sent to Bow Street and the second to me, I suspect you were the one who recognized me from the start. You know who I really am.”

Poppy dared not even blink.

It means nothing, she told herself. There were hundreds of people who could recognize him. She was still here to help Beatrix. Nothing would change that.

Nothing at all.

“Do you know what else I know?”

“What?” Poppy said snippily, wary of his tone.

“You are in all sorts of trouble.”

“Is that—”

“Miss Middleton.”

James watched as the slight color beneath the white paint drained from the little deceiver’s face. He could not believe he hadn’t fitted the pieces of the puzzle together sooner.

Charlotte Rose was Poppy Middleton.

When he’d been awoken by his brother, he’d been too addled to decipher his findings from the previous evening. Now that he knew the identity behind all that rouge, it was hard to imagine how he *hadn’t* seen her when he first met Miss Rose at the theatre. He had dreamed and fantasized about Poppy Middleton enough that he ought to have known those lips, that impish smile, those startling eyes to be hers.

Yet the revelation hadn’t snapped into place until the crisp London breeze hit his jaw.

She, however, had known exactly who he was from the start. *She* had set him on Elliot Jennings’s trail, which further meant she knew the reason he was here. And she had kept him in the bloody dark.

James had always prided himself on his keen observation skills. And yet Miss Middleton had made a mockery of those talents.

That, more than anything, chafed his ego.

“You know?” she yelped in question.

He had shocked her. Good.

“I should not be so surprised, Miss Middleton, that you are nourishing the seed of scandal again. Yet I find myself baffled to the degree to which you have outdone yourself this time.”

“As I recall, you had no problem enlisting my aid two years ago

when we saved a woman from an abusive husband.”

“I did not know the full extent of your foolishness then. You nearly set all of London on fire.”

“A minor miscalculation,” Poppy muttered, “of which I still get nightmares.”

“And what miscalculation are you using to justify this mischief, this play-acting as Charlotte Rose? Just what trouble are you embroiled in?”

“I am helping my friend.”

“The real Charlotte Rose, I presume. How exactly are you helping her?”

“By helping you.”

James narrowed his eyes on the woman. “Helping me? You’ve been withholding knowledge until now.”

“Yes, well, I didn’t intend on revealing myself, so much as helping quietly. That is why I sent you the second missive as soon as you mentioned there were twelve Jennings.”

“That still doesn’t explain why the devil are you pretending to be Charlotte during the day?” James’s hackles rose when she looked away. “There is more, isn’t there?”

She sighed, then confessed reluctantly, “Jennings and whoever he spoke to that day know they were overheard. I am looking out for my friend.”

All of James’s senses went on alert. “How the devil did that happen?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just know that it did.”

“No,” James bit out. “I want to know everything. Every bloody last detail. How do you expect to protect yourself and your friend? Do you know anything about the man you are dealing with? Are you sure he and Jennings overheard?”

“Who is the man you are searching for?” she countered.

James bit his jaw. “A dangerous man by the name of Walker. Now answer the question.”

“Fine,” she snapped. “Charlotte gasped.”

“Bloody hell,” James muttered. “That’s why she exposed them. She feared for her life.” James narrowed his eyes on her. “I still don’t understand how you are planning to help your friend. You’re only putting yourself in danger by being here.” He pinned her with a suspicious look. “Unless there is something else you are not telling me. Why *are* you here, Miss Middleton?”

“Charlotte lost a necklace in her scramble to hide from the conspirators and they may now be in possession of it. No one has seen Charlotte wear it, thankfully, but I suspect they are searching for the owner as we speak.”

“And what—” James stopped as the realization hit. “You plan to steal the trinket back,” he finished, incredulous.

“The necklace is a family heirloom. Charlotte was too shaken up to retrieve the heirloom herself. I offered to help.”

“Of course you did,” James bit out. Ever the Middleton to pounce right into danger. “It is just a jewel. It not worth this risk.”

“It is not just a jewel. The value is priceless—and the only possession Charlotte has left of her mother.”

James sighed. “Who else knows about your ruse?”

“No one.”

James heard the truth in her voice.

“Do you truly believe Hargrove is behind my attack?”

“I’m about ninety-five percent certain.”

James crossed his arms over his chest. “What about the other five percent?”

She shrugged. “Another jealous admirer? Jennings performed last night alongside Charlotte and Mr. Marks. Who else could it have been? Jennings’s accomplice? This Mr. Walker? That would suggest they know you are here to investigate them. Which means you are an even worse spy than I believed.”

“I’m not a spy.”

“Of course you are not.”

“Dammit, this is dangerous business, Miss Middleton.” James’s voice rose in his frustration. “You cannot be involved.”

She leaped forward to press her hand over his mouth. “Shhh! And call me Miss Rose. Nothing has changed.”

He circled her wrist and pulled her hand away from him. “Everything has changed.”

“Why?” she challenged, shrugging out of his hold. “Because I’m a woman?”

“Because you have no idea how dangerous the man I’m after is and you are not trained for fieldwork.”

“I have no intention of getting in your way. I am merely after the necklace.”

“The same thing, Miss Rose. I cannot do my job and worry about what trouble you and Charlotte will get into. I’ll retrieve the damn trinket. Both you and your other personality should take a leave of absence.”

Poppy stiffened. “Charlotte will never abandon the play. And I shall never abandon her.”

“I’m not giving you a choice,” James growled. “The two of you will stay out of my investigation.”

A sound of frustration left her lips. “It is not your choice to make. I’m here for the same reason you are—well, almost—you want

whoever is plotting a riot, and I want to protect my friend.”

James pinched his nose. “Dammit! It isn’t safe.”

“No one knows I’m not the real Charlotte,” she whispered. “And they don’t suspect Charlotte is the one who overheard them, and neither do they suspect you. We are safe.”

“I figured out your little ruse,” James pointed out. “And safety becomes moot the moment you start poking through Jennings’s belongings.” His eyes narrowed to slits. “You haven’t poked around his belongings, have you?”

She shot him a belligerent glance. “No, and you figured us out because, well, you are *you*.”

James wanted to curse. “If I—”

“I am not going anywhere, Shaw.”

“Have you thought of your reputation if your play-acting is discovered and made public?”

“My reputation. Not yours.” She paused. “We can work together.”

For a moment James thought he hadn’t heard her right. Work together? Utter foolery.

Then one, lone brow lifted at him, in what James could only perceive as expectancy, and he laughed, a hollow sound that echoed off the walls of her room.

“That is not happening, *no*.”

“Then how do you suggest we proceed since I am not leaving?”

James glared at her. “I haven’t dodged bullet after bullet in pursuit of Walker only to be caught because of a stubborn, bored woman who decided to play the heroine.”

“Look, Shaw, you cannot change my mind. We can either work separately or with one another. Either way, I will not get in the way of your investigation. I want you to catch these men.”

James scoffed.

“I understand you are angry—” she went on, but James stopped her with the lift of his hand.

“Angry?” His voice was a hiss of breath. “Anger does not begin to describe what I feel.” He advanced on her. “Do you *know* what I am experiencing?”

Her lips parted and shut again.

“Outrage.” His hands balled into fists. “That is what’s coursing through my blood. Seething fury. Because I’ve been scrambling in the dark for days while you have been playing the star. I should drag you back to your father.”

“You would not dare!”

“Oh, I *would* dare,” James growled.

Her chin jutted forward and her shoulders set in defense. “If you expose me, Shaw, I shall expose you.”

“You would destroy my investigation for stubbornness?”

“Why not? You would destroy mine. I will *not* abandon my friend. I warn you, Shaw, if you exclude me, I shall find the necklace on my own.”

The damn woman wasn't bluffing.

He would not, could not, risk the chance she'd reveal him and his mission. And she bloody knew it. In fact, he was the one bluffing. He'd never drag her to her father. He didn't understand the lack of impulse himself, but he did know he'd much rather have her close than off doing Christ-knows-what behind his back.

James cursed.

He thought he would unravel the mystery of Charlotte. And he had. He just hadn't anticipated unraveling along with it.

“You . . . Dammit, you are . . .” He cursed again and pretended he did not notice that winsome smile of hers. “Willful. Maddening. Bloody stubborn, woman.”

Chapter 10

Poppy Middleton had sashayed back into his life. Last time, her presence in it had been brief, nothing but a flash of light. But that spark had left an indelible mark, nonetheless.

Now that he'd be working with her once again, James found himself driven to distraction. He braced for the impact of her soft voice every time her lips parted. The sweet scent of violets beckoned his feet to close the distance between them each time he got within whiffing distance. Even now, away from her vicinity, his memory could crisply summon Miss Middleton to mind, one lock of hair falling down the side of her face. He wanted to reach out and touch the strand. Slide the satiny ringlet through his fingers. Set it behind her ear, maybe. Let the rest of her hair loose and drag his fingers through the silken mass.

But James shouldn't be fantasizing about Poppy Middleton's hair. Especially since all he wanted to do was touch the soft curl when he should be focused on chasing down Walker.

He glanced over to Derek.

They were trailing Sullivan Marks in what must be the most tedious route James had ever had the displeasure to trail a man.

His mind was back at Regent Theatre where he had left Miss Middleton two hours ago. What was she up to? Was she keeping out of trouble, out of danger?

"What do you know about Poppy Middleton?" James asked, the question leaving his tongue before he could think better of it.

Derek had been introduced to the Middletons. He had even met Poppy this morning as Charlotte Rose. Though James would retire on the spot if his brother recognized her through all that face paint where he had not.

"The Countess of Westfield's cousin? I believe she is in London with her father. Both her sisters are touring various parts of the country with their husbands."

"How the devil do you know that?"

Derek smirked. "There is little I don't know."

James snorted. Not true. Still. "You keep track of the Middletons? There seem better ways to invest in your time."

"I keep track of everyone who has ever worked with us."

"It was a onetime occurrence," James pointed out. One he had never forgotten. "They aren't a threat."

"Maybe not. Why are you asking about them?"

James had never hidden anything from his brother, so he simply answered, "Poppy Middleton is Charlotte Rose. One of them. There

are two.”

Derek slowed his pace. A muscle in his jaw ticked. “She is the one who sent word about Jennings,” Derek said flatly.

“Yes.”

Derek cursed. “*This* is why I keep track of everyone who has ever worked with us.”

“In that case, brother, you are slacking.”

A low growl.

James suppressed a grin. He both hated and loved how Miss Middleton had gotten the better of them. It was not easy to pull the wool over their eyes. “You met her this morning.”

“*That* was Miss Middleton? What the hell is wrong with the chit? Does Charles Middleton not govern his daughters?”

They ducked behind a carriage as Marks stepped up to a newsstand cart.

“Charles Middleton is an open-minded man as far as I can tell.”

“How the hell did Miss Middleton get herself involved in Walker’s business?”

“She didn’t. The real Charlotte is her friend,” James told his brother, relaying all he had learned from Miss Middleton.

“This is not good.” Derek let out an oath, then narrowed his eyes on James. “She intrigues you.”

James wiped all emotion from his face. “Don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“It’s relevant because she is involved,” Derek said. “And because no woman has ever intrigued you as much as this one.”

Derek could be a wily bastard when he wanted. His brother rarely ever missed anything.

“I never said she intrigued me.”

The corner of his brother’s lips lifted.

“What is with the sudden scrutiny? Let’s stay focused, shall we?” James grumbled. They resumed their pace. “We have the authors of both messages. We have Jennings. Now we only need Walker.”

“Do not forget whoever struck you over the head.” Derek’s eyes darkened. His tone was ominous.

“Hargrove.”

“You certain it’s him?”

James thought back to Hargrove’s fury at finding James with Miss Rose. The man was a fool. And a coward. “Yes, I am certain.”

“What are we going to do about him?”

“I will handle that bastard,” James growled. His hand lifted to the back of his head where a dull pain still throbbed. “And when I find him, I’ll be sure to include you in the beating I’m planning for that weasel. For now, Walker remains my sole purpose.”

“What about Miss Middleton?”

James shrugged. “What about her?”

A rare, sudden spark flashed across his brother’s face. “Seems like the chit needs a husband to tame her wild ways.”

James came up short. *What the bloody hell?*

James was no blustering fool, but for a moment horror replaced all good sense, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

Poppy Middleton? Married?

James couldn’t fathom it even though her sisters had already tied the knot. And he didn’t like it.

Why the hell didn’t he like it?

Derek continued, casting him a glance. “She would make a fitting wife.”

“Where the hell is this coming from?”

The corner of his brother’s eyes creased at the edges, yet his mouth pulled thin. “Things might change.”

Understanding lit.

“Madeline is in London.”

Derek’s features settled back into a cool visage. “Yes.”

“That bad?”

“Be thankful you are on Walker. I’ve been badgered into a hornet’s nest with a ten-foot pole about our life’s choices.”

“Through the solicitor?”

“Yes.”

James winced at the annoyance in Derek’s tone. Operating out of the eye of society might have its perks, but a man could never hide from duty. Or, apparently, family. James would much rather deal with wayward women and radical orators than his aunt Madeline.

“How did she react to your rebuff of her plea for us to reenter society?”

“Technically, we never left.”

“Trifles.”

“Do you want to reenter society?” Derek asked suddenly. “Take a wife? Sire offspring?”

“Where is this coming from?” James asked with a frown. “We chose this life. We agreed to end the family curse with us. I’m not prepared to subject a woman to the dangers of my life.”

“We could walk away for good. Change our minds.”

“Just what *did* our aunt say?”

Derek’s jaw clenched. “Reportedly, Madeline was ruthless in her attack on our choices.”

“So laments the woman who abandoned us,” James announced. Dealing with Madeline’s complaints were not on his list of priorities. “She fled to the continent in the wake of the scandal. She, better than

anyone, ought to choose her criticism with care.”

Derek gave a single nod. “More or less what I told the solicitor to convey.”

“Reclaiming your title and stepping back into the light of society is not a decision to make lightly.”

“I’m aware. If I choose to reenter society as Wolverton, then you will be cast in the same light. Old speculation and rumors will start up again.”

James snorted. “Got a thick hide. You?”

“Naturally.”

“Then I propose we revisit the matter of Madeline and her demands after we catch Walker.”

“Agreed.”

James raked a hand through his hair and winced as he did so.

“You should rest,” Derek said, having caught the brief flicker of pain in that twitch.

“I’ll rest when I have Walker’s neck in a noose,” James said. “Damn Hargrove. I’m going to wring his neck when I find him.”

“We’ve had an unfortunate set of events the past several days.”

James regarded his brother incredulously. “Just unfortunate? Where’s the rage at almost losing your brother?”

The corner of Derek’s lips twitched, so slightly, barely discernable. “You’re alive, aren’t you? That is all that matters.”

James scoffed. “Show some brotherly love, will you?”

But regardless of Derek’s current humor, James hadn’t missed the shadow of rage that flashed in his brother’s eyes when he discovered James had been attacked. Derek had plenty of fury on his behalf. Hargrove should be deuced grateful they were keeping their focus on Walker for the time being.

“I received news from Brighton. There’s chatter that a shipment of unauthorized gin is coming into harbor. I’m leaving first thing tomorrow.” Derek glanced over to James. “I’ve ordered a crew of reinforcements for you. How is that for brotherly love?”

“I don’t need bloody babysitters, Derek.”

“I know.”

“Then call them off.”

Derek’s jaw clenched.

“I *can* handle this mission,” James growled.

“Two men, then.”

“One.”

“Fine.”

“Your face says *not* fine.”

“What does my face have to do with your wherewithal?”

“Everlasting hell,” James cursed. He decided to ignore that. “Good

luck in Brighton.”

“I don’t need luck.”

James snorted. “We all need luck.”

“Not me.”

“Nevertheless, have some fun while you are in Brighton.”

Fun is for the idle, James mouthed as Derek tossed the words his way. His brother’s face set into a mask of stone. Derek, if he could accomplish it, would never choose to show any emotion. A talent that had served him well working for the government. He turned his attention to Marks, who was perusing an array of ribbons at a street vendor.

“Remind me why we are following Marks?”

“He may be Walker,” Derek answered. “Or hiding him.”

“Yes, but why are *we* trailing him? Did you not have men on him?”

“They are on another mission.”

“In any event, I don’t get the sense that Marks is a man embroiled in criminal activity.”

“Yet criminal activity is underfoot in his theatre. Better to be sure of him than not.”

James could not argue with that. Derek was not a man to wager on an outcome. He calculated odds. He acted accordingly. Simple as that.

James relied on a more instinctual approach. Once he got a whiff of suspicion in his nostrils, he followed the scent like a bloodhound. There was an important, imperative detail he was missing, which was why James planned to observe the backstage in action tonight.

And he would not leave until he had overturned every last stone.

Poppy leaned against a prop and studied Sullivan Marks and Elliot Jennings clashing steel. Their sparring, she had learned, was for a final scene in the play where the men fought for the love of Patricia, played by Charlotte. In the end, neither man got to be with the love of their life, each perishing from fatal wounds they received during the duel of swords.

Such senseless loss.

A tragedy.

A feeling of being observed overcame Poppy, and the hairs on her neck rose. She swept her environment with a fleeting glance. When she detected no one in the wings of the stage, she shrugged off the feeling.

The men were good.

Each action was calculated and expertly practiced. It was clear that it took a great many rehearsals to make it so.

Poppy scrunched her brows. Now was the perfect moment to slip

away and search Jennings's room for the necklace, but she had promised James she would not do anything without him.

Then again, Poppy wasn't so sure being alone with James Shaw was the best of ideas. She still couldn't believe she had kissed him. And no matter the reason behind her actions, Poppy knew she hadn't done it merely because of Hargrove. Poppy knew this because she wanted to do it again.

The clang of a sword hitting the stage startled her out of her musings.

"You are coming at me too hard, Marks," Jennings growled, retrieving his sword and sidestepping a thrust from Marks.

"You have been slacking of late," Marks countered. "I need you at the top of your game."

"Late night."

Poppy's ears snapped to attention.

"Late night with your lady love, heh?"

Jennings grunted.

"Florence tells me you are using storage space in the basement of the third building," Marks said.

"For a friend. Didn't think you'd mind."

Jennings evaded a particularly close thrust and a small gasp involuntarily escaped Poppy's lips, drawing the gazes of the men.

"Miss Rose," Mr. Marks greeted. "Didn't see you there."

Poppy shifted on her feet. "I was just passing and I . . ." she trailed off at a loss.

"Enjoying the action?" Marks suggested with a grin.

"I suppose you could say that," Poppy answered, barely audible. Her face flushed.

"Care to join our sparring?" Marks asked. "Jennings here is having an off day."

"Your ass is off," Jennings grouched.

Poppy shook her head furiously. "Oh, I beg of you, no. I'm not experienced with swordsmanship, unfortunately."

Jennings gaze drifted over her speculatively, and Poppy wanted to sink into a hole. She didn't have any swordsmanship craft, but that did not mean Beatrix didn't. Poppy cursed her tongue. This was the reason she ought to keep her mouth shut.

"Come on, Charlotte," Marks said good-naturedly. His smile turned wolfish. "I'll show you. Perhaps you will excel better than Jennings here."

Jennings scowled at Marks, who motioned Poppy over. She took a hesitant step toward them, sending up a small prayer that she did not get caught impersonating an actress.

Marks handed her his sword.

Poppy accepted the blade, surprised at the light weight of the steel in her grip.

“Now stand with your front foot pointing forward and your back foot with a ninety-degree angle, legs bent like this.”

Poppy watched as Marks positioned himself and mimicked his posture.

“You are a good swordsman, Marks, but not so much at teaching.”

“What’s wrong with my teaching?” Marks asked Jennings.

Jennings shrugged.

“You suppose you can do any better?” Marks challenged.

Jennings shoved his sword to Marks in answer and stepped in position behind Poppy. Startled, she nearly jumped when his arms came around her and gently took hold of both of hers. “Your sword arm should be bent and leveled at forty-five-degrees in front of you,” he spoke in her ear. “The other arm should be kept behind you.” He guided that arm into position behind her back.

“That is all?” Poppy asked. This close, with his earthy scent in her nostrils, it was hard to believe Jennings was a bad man. He seemed patient. Kind.

Marks chuckled behind her.

“That’s just the beginning. Follow my lead.”

Follow his—

“Marks, attack.”

Marks lunged forward, and Jennings gripped her wrists, guiding her body into a defense and a swift counter to the attack.

“When your opponent attacks,” Jennings said, “you block his lunge with a parry and then riposte, counterattack.”

“A dance,” Poppy murmured, slashing the sword through the air. “It’s like a dance.”

“Yes, a cunning dance of will, I should say.”

“He with the strongest will wins,” Marks said with a smirk.

Jennings said nothing in reply, guiding Poppy into another counterattack after their sword clashed with Marks’s.

Poppy’s face split into a grin. “This is fun.”

“I see you take the education of your employees quite seriously.”

They all turned towards the voice laced with steel.

Poppy’s eyes widened as they collided with James’s. His gaze burned hot, which belied the quirk at the upper corner of his mouth.

“Mr. Greenwich,” Marks greeted. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Jennings’s arms fell away from Poppy as he straightened. She could feel James’s displeasure reaching out from across the auditorium and experienced a slight pinch of guilt.

She hadn’t done anything wrong, she told herself.

Surely James did not expect her to stay in her dressing room when he was not around? But judging from the tingling sensation running down her spine, he expected just that.

Well, he could adjust his expectations. Poppy was here for a purpose, and it was not to fall into line.

"I had some paperwork with Mr. Florence, though I cannot seem to find him." He pointedly averted his gaze from her, jaw clenched tight.

"Ah," Marks said. "Florence is running errands for me. He should be back in an hour or so."

James nodded. "I will leave you to your business."

"Stay," Marks called out. "Rehearsals start in fifteen minutes."

Lord Above!

Poppy had completely lost track of time. Beatrix would arrive at any moment. She handed back Marks's sword and hurried from the stage, heart beating in her throat. Why was she so nervous?

"Charlotte, wait," Mr. Marks called out. "Where are you going?"

"I must ready myself for rehearsals," she called over her shoulder as she dashed from the room. "I shall hurry back."

She had risked their entire ruse spending time in these men's presence so near to Beatrix's arrival.

"Miss Rose."

That voice stopped her dead in her tracks just as she reached the side entrance of the theatre. She bit her lip and turned.

"What the bloody hell are you doing?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"That," he pointed in the direction of the stage, "spectacular display of foolishness."

"They wanted to give me a lesson," she hissed. "I could hardly refuse."

"Did his arms have to be around you?" James demanded.

"I couldn't just shrug him off!"

"Why the hell not?"

"That would draw attention."

"Everything you do draws attention!"

She allowed her gaze to sweep him from head to toe. "Are you jealous?"

"Do not be absurd," Shaw growled. He lowered his voice to a hiss, "You were rubbing arms with a suspect in my investigation."

"Perhaps that is part of my plan."

"Then kill the plan."

"Do not tell me what to do, Mr. *Greenwich*."

"Do not test me, Miss *Rose*."

A group of performers entered through the side door. Rehearsals would begin soon. Beatrix might already be in her dressing room.

“I must go. You can browbeat me another time.” Poppy didn’t wait for his reply, but hurried past him and ducked through the dressing room door.

Chapter 11

Two days later

Poppy stretched out in bed, yawning as she rolled over, eyes squinting to adjust to the light. Tonight was the grand opening of the play, and the theatre would be bustling to get ready. As everyone had their part in the fuss, Poppy would not step into Charlotte's shoes today.

James would be there tonight.

Poppy scowled, suddenly recalling she was not in a courteous mood and the reason why.

James Shaw had been avoiding her for two days.

Thoroughly annoyed, Poppy tossed back the covers from the bed and rose. She padded over to the door and rang for her maid. If James was determined to avoid her, Poppy was committed to go forth with her search for the necklace.

She *had* warned him.

An hour later, she entered the drawing room and headed straight for the writing desk. She would draft Beatrix a letter informing her of her plans to sniff through Jennings's room today.

A flutter of nerves contracted her belly. She ought to eat, but Poppy could not think of food at a time like this. She'd rather contemplate all the ways she was going to throttle James Shaw for treating her like a child.

Damn the man. She hadn't gone through Jennings's dressing room because she waited for him, and he returned her consideration by keeping his distance.

However, Poppy didn't get a chance to give further thought to the matter or compose Beatrix her note, for her cousin, Lady Belle, breezed into the drawing room.

"Poppy! I'm so pleased I caught you." She enveloped Poppy in a tight hug. "Every time I've called on you the past week, you have been out."

Drat. Belle had been calling on her? "I've been shopping for a specific trinket," Poppy said, offering Belle a small smile. "I cannot seem to track it down."

"Perhaps I can be of help?" Belle offered.

"Thank you, but that's not necessary. I've been enjoying hunting for this bauble. It's quite diverting." She motioned Belle to the sofa and changed the topic. "Tell me what has brought you here. Has Westfield angered you again?"

"How perceptive. My mood is distressingly wretched this morning. I thought you might cheer me up."

Poppy frowned. "Why? What has Westfield done?"

"Westfield hasn't done anything. I am the culprit in this fight."

Poppy hid a grin. "What did *you* do?"

"I fired yet another governess."

"Again?" Poppy shook her head. "What did she do this time?" Her cousin must be the most overprotective mother Poppy had ever come across.

"I caught her sleeping while William was left to his own devices. What if he hurt himself? I'd have wrung that woman's neck."

"Westfield doesn't agree? That seems odd."

Belle huffed. "That man is all heart."

Poppy laughed.

"But enough about me, how are you faring? Now that Willow and Holly are married, you must be lonely. "

Poppy pulled a face. "Not *that* lonely. I'm quite enjoying the peace."

Belle chuckled. "Do not enjoy your tranquility too much," her cousin remarked with a smile. "Your sisters are returning soon, and you are next in line for matrimony."

Poppy groaned. They were returning in about a week, according to Holly's last letter. The couples had met up somewhere in York and were traveling back together. Poppy still couldn't quite believe it, given the two men's history.

"I suspect they will host a grand event and invite all the available, unattached gentlemen in London," Belle said with a wink.

"I suspect the same, though I refuse to dwell on what has not yet come to pass, as I shall further not dwell on it even if it does."

"It won't be so easy."

"I shall feign a belly ache and slip away before their shenanigans start."

Belle laughed. "I see they will have their hands full with you as well."

Poppy shrugged. She had never told her sisters how almost perishing had changed her heart. Hadn't wished to burden them with her worries. But perhaps the time had come to enlighten them if it meant they would not attempt any matchmaking.

A footman suddenly appeared at the door, announcing Beatrix.

Poppy blinked.

It seemed she would not have to pen her friend a note after all.

"Send her in, Miles," Poppy said. "And please ask Cook to prepare a tray of tea and biscuits."

The footman bowed and disappeared. Moments later, Beatrix strode into the room. She halted when she saw Belle, who slowly rose with Poppy.

“Beatrix,” Poppy greeted with a smile, motioning her friend over. “What a delightful surprise. Allow me to introduce you to my cousin, Lady Belle, Countess of Westfield. Belle, this is my dear friend, Miss Beatrix Hale.”

Beatrix flushed and curtsied. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance, my lady. Please accept my apologies. I was not aware Poppy had callers.”

“Oh, posh!” Belle said, waving her apology aside. “You are a friend of Poppy’s. No need to stand on ceremony for me. And please, call me Belle.”

Beatrix directed her wide eyes to Poppy, who laughed. “It’s easier to do as she asks.” When they all settled in, Poppy told Belle, “Beatrix has been keeping me company in Willow and Holly’s absence.”

“How lovely,” Belle said with a stretch of her lips. “Have you been helping my cousin in her search for the elusive trinket?”

Beatrix’s eyes widened.

“As a matter of fact,” Poppy interjected, “she has. We’ve been combing Bond Street with a fine comb.”

“I’m beyond curious. You must show me this bauble once you find it.”

“Of course,” Poppy agreed.

“If we find it,” Beatrix countered.

Belle scrunched her brows.

“It’s a lost family heirloom,” Poppy explained.

“Ah,” Belle said. “A mystery, then. I love a good mystery.” Belle leaned forward to whisper conspiringly, “I consider myself an expert at sleuthing.”

“She is,” Poppy said with a chuckle. “I can attest to that. And should we need help cousin, you shall be the first we enlist.”

“Marvelous!” Belle exclaimed. “You should join us for dinner tonight, both of you. If nothing else than to prevent me from boxing my husband’s ears.”

“That is generous of you, my lady, Belle,” Beatrix said. “Thank you. Unfortunately, I have plans for tonight.”

“So have I, cousin,” Poppy said. “It’s the grand opening of *The Rising Tempest* at Regent Theatre tonight.”

“The *Rising Tempest*?” Belle murmured. “It seems to ring a faint bell.”

“Charlotte Rose is the leading actress. Perhaps you have heard of her?”

“Of course,” Belle said. “*The Times* has reported her quite the talent. A rising star, I believe they called her. I was not aware you are so immersed in the theatre community.”

Poppy had forgotten how perceptive Belle could be. “Charlotte is a

friend of ours.”

Beatrix gave a little cough behind her hand.

Belle’s jaw dropped. “You know Charlotte Rose, the *actress*, and did not tell me? How on earth did you all become friends? Tell me everything.”

Poppy gave Beatrix a sidelong glance.

“Poppy saved Miss Rose from a suitor on Bond Street,” Beatrix answered. “We all became fast friends in a short time.”

“How delightful! I cannot believe you know Charlotte Rose. Wait until Westfield learns of this!”

“Aren’t you mad at him,” Poppy asked.

“Right,” Belle grouched. “I shall tell him after he has groveled his way back into my good graces.”

Poppy shook her head on a laugh. “You are the very devil, Belle.”

“The devil’s wife, you mean,” Belle said. “Westfield deserves some teasing.”

Two footmen arrived with a tray of tea and lemon cakes.

“You said the theatre’s grand opening is tonight?” Belle asked Beatrix as Poppy poured them tea. She snapped up a lemon cake and dropped it into her mouth.

“Yes, Poppy volunteered. “The play is a tragedy in which both Charlotte’s suitors die.”

Belle glared at her. “Must you spoil the ending in such a rude way?”

Poppy laughed. “That is not the ending.”

“How does it end? No, do not answer that. I’ve decided I want to attend the play. Shall we go together?” Belle asked Poppy.

Poppy’s jaw slackened. “Tonight?”

“Yes, silly, when else would I mean? It’s just what I need to restore my mood.”

Poppy went still as a lamp post.

James would be present tonight. Belle was acquainted with James. Both were terribly observant. It occurred to Poppy Beatrix still did not know that James knew *everything*.

“What about William?” Poppy asked in hopes to discourage her cousin.

“Westfield can look after William since it seems he is in dire need of a lesson in what it takes to care for a child.”

Beatrix almost choked on a bite of lemon cake.

“Very well,” Poppy said, biting her lower lips. She had no other choice. “We shall attend together, then.”

“Splendid!”

Poppy sent up a small prayer that she wouldn’t run into James tonight.

James shoved his gloved hands into his pockets as he exited Boodle's.

He had met with Chamberlain, one of his acquaintances who was well connected to the underbelly of London. Chamberlain had never heard a word of Jennings. Of Walker, he could write a book, mostly fables and rumors, a man romanticized into a saint. And perhaps he was, at least to his following. To the House of Commons, Walker remained a nuisance, and one best brought to justice. But Chamberlain had never heard of Jennings before.

Annoyed, James headed toward Oxford Street. He sighed, thinking about the troublesome minx he had avoided these past two days. At the same time, even though he had kept his distance, he'd kept watch and made sure she did not get into any trouble. She hadn't, but it had taken all of his will-power to stay away from her, and it had plunged his mood into darkness.

Poppy Middleton probably wanted his head on a serving platter. James scowled. Damn woman was mad as a March hare. And just who the hell was the real Charlotte Rose? How had she and Poppy met? How had they become such good friends that Miss Middleton would put her life in danger for this actress?

All these questions churned in James's mind as he stepped onto Piccadilly.

The grand opening of the play was tonight. He didn't want to go. But as patron to the theatre, he had to show face. Florence had nearly collapsed when James had declined the invitation. A slippery slope, this path James walked. If he was recognized tonight, his cover might be blown. Which was why Derek was attending as well. They didn't need to hide. They needed only to avoid Florence. Luckily for them, the man was a skittish fellow.

"James?"

James turned to glance over his shoulder to the woman who had called his name. He stopped in his tracks.

Everything in him stilled.

He even swore his heart stuttered to a stop as fury ripped through the cavities of his bones.

Poppy and Beatrix waved Belle off and waited until her carriage disappeared around the bend before they turned to one another.

"I thought she'd never leave," Poppy said on a deeply exhaled sigh.

Beatrix chuckled. "Your cousin is lovely."

"That she is, but I wanted to go through Jennings's dressing room today. Now there is no time."

"Perhaps it is for the best. Your presence might have been questioned. I always take a few hours off before the play."

"Mr. Marks allows this? Would he not want all hands on deck, so to speak?"

"As you heard, I'm a rising star." Beatrix winked. "It has its perks."

"Then I suppose my cousin's visit had been timely."

Beatrix nodded. "I should have been clear about that."

"I only just realized that I never asked what your necklace looked like. Imagine if I'd be off trying to find it!"

Beatrix's brows furrowed. "It is gold with a purple gemstone. It's not grand or lavish, but delicate and rather simple."

Poppy nodded. "Another thing, before I forget, Shaw, or rather Mr. Greenwich, knows our secret."

Beatrix's eyes bulged. "He *knows*? As in my identity?"

"Lord no, only about the ruse. He figured it out before he got struck over the head."

"Dear lord."

"He tried to get us to leave the theatre, but I held firm. Offered to work together."

"And he agreed?"

"I thought so. But the man has been avoiding me. So tomorrow I will sneak into Jennings's dressing room and retrieve your necklace."

"What if he doesn't have it?"

"Let us cross that bridge when we get there."

Beatrix nodded slowly. "That's good then. We can put this behind us soon."

Poppy drew her brows together as she suddenly recalled the woman with Jennings that first day she took James on a tour of the theatre. "Who is the woman Mr. Jennings is always with?"

"Woman?" Beatrix's brows knitted. "Which one. He is quite popular amongst the actresses."

"An older lady," Poppy murmured. "I'm not sure whether she is an actress."

"Oh, that is Mrs. Temperance March. I believe she is family of Mr. Jennings. She comes to visit him every so often."

"Or he prefers older women," Poppy mused.

"Poppy!" Beatrix laughed.

"What? It is not *that* farfetched. If you ask me, what is more bizarre is that he is hatching a diabolical plot. In fact, Mr. Jennings does not strike me as a man who would hurt anyone, much rather start a riot."

"You believe I misheard the conversation?"

Poppy shook her head. "No, but I think there is more going on than merely meets the eye and the ear."

Chapter 12

Poppy stepped through the theatre doors marveling anew. The days she had spent as Charlotte, familiarizing the halls and the nooks and crooks of the backstage had been vastly different from the glorious grandeur of crystal chandeliers sparkling tonight.

A sense of awe wrapped around her as she saw the theatre through a different light. 'Twas a heady feeling strolling over the plush, velvet carpet with knowledge no other person in the audience possessed.

It would also be the first time she would observe Beatrix in full splendor. She had hardly touched the working life of an actress, but the little she had, Poppy had gained great respect for her friend.

Sad to say, she hadn't found an opportunity to attend one of her friend's plays up until now, and Poppy felt giddy with excitement.

As for James, the devil had betrayed her as far as she was concerned. He'd be here tonight, but Poppy didn't care. She was determined not to dwell on him or speak to him or look at him, so she pushed him from her mind.

Poppy smiled as she trailed after Belle, attempting, but not altogether succeeding, to remain in the shadow of her cousin's vibrancy as they moved through the boisterous crowd. Between the scandal of her sisters' weddings, Poppy had, up until now, tried to stay out of public scrutiny.

"I still cannot believe you left Westfield at home to watch over your son."

Belle chuckled. "He deserves it for being such a grouch. I have appointed him as the new governess," she scrunched her brow, "or is that governman?"

"He is such a *lucky* man."

Belle huffed, and then suddenly gasped. "Dear Lord, is that Derek and James Shaw or has my vision failed me?"

Poppy whirled, and sure enough, her gaze collided with a familiar set of cerulean eyes. Her heart stuttered to a halt as the depth of their intensity delved into her. Infuriating man. He best stay clear of her. She was done placing her faith in others. Best put it in herself from now on.

She lifted her chin and angled her head away.

Take that, James Shaw.

"I haven't seen them in society for ages."

"Oh?" Poppy murmured. "Well, I would imagine they are rather busy."

From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed him leaning over and murmuring in his brother's ear. She turned her back to them to cut off

any temptation. What in the world was he doing at the theatre with his brother anyway? It seemed calculating risks were what the Shaw Brothers were made of.

"They are heading this way!" Belle exclaimed.

"What?" Poppy croaked.

She panicked. He could *not* approach with Belle here! Lord, if her cousin got wind of anything, even the slightest whiff of something, she would hound Poppy until Poppy broke and spilled every last detail. That could not happen. Poppy loved Belle, but she would commandeer Poppy's quest.

"Lady Westfield," that sinful voice came all too soon. "You look exceptionally lovely tonight."

Poppy ducked behind her cousin. She inched away from them, searching the crowd for any familiar face she could claim an excuse to escape to.

"Thank you," Belle cooed.

Three sets of eyes directed at her. She lowered her lashes in a grimace before plastering a smile on her face and circling to the trio.

"Miss Middleton," her name drawled off James's tongue in greeting. "Always a pleasure."

Poppy's mouth dried up. She could scarcely catch a breath. That was how it seemed to be with James. The impact of him was indescribably strong. She inclined her head but kept her gaze on his brother, who greeted her with a slight upturn of his lip.

James frowned.

"Has your husband not joined you?" Derek asked Belle, his gaze flicking beyond them in search.

Belle grinned. "Oh, no. Westfield has let us loose on London all on our own."

"I can scarcely believe he let you out of his sight, Lady Westfield," James drawled, a smile in place.

Only Poppy saw the light strain at the edges. Not that she was staring at him. She saw the forced curve from the corner of her eye.

"James? Derek?"

Both men stiffened when an older woman, elegantly draped in a royal blue gown, approached them. She was beautiful, with dark auburn hair infused with strands of grey and expressive, almost sad, blue eyes.

To Poppy's surprise, James let out a savage growl and shifted on his feet.

"Please, James, do not turn your back on me again. All I want to do is talk."

"I think I understand now," Derek said deadpan. To the woman, his voice was frost. "Madeline, this is neither the time nor the place."

Poppy and Belle shared A Look. Whoever this woman was, neither man wanted anything to do with her.

"Will you not introduce me to your friends?" She directed a smile at Poppy and Belle. "I am Countess Madeline Demikov, Au—"

"Madeline," James snapped. "That is enough."

A Russian countess?

Poppy was instantly intrigued.

"A pleasure, Countess," Belle murmured uncertainly. "Since the men have completely lost their manners, allow me to introduce myself as well. I am Belle Tremaine, Countess of Westfield, and this is my cousin, Miss Poppy Middleton."

Poppy inclined her head. "How do you do?"

"Charmed," the countess said with a small smile. "How beautiful the both of you are. It pleases me to know that my—"

"Do not presume to know anything," Derek interrupted, a steely edge to his voice. "Lady Westfield, Miss Middleton, if you shall excuse us." He guided the countess away with gentle pressure on her elbow. James inclined his head and stiffly set out after the duo.

"Well, that was odd," Belle said.

"Yes," Poppy murmured. "Who do you think that woman was?"

"I've no clue, but I would stake my life that the answer is attached to a juicy bit of gossip."

"Given how mysterious those two are, we might never know."

"Wondering at a mystery is more fun than knowing it," Belle informed Poppy.

Poppy had to admit, she did not agree with that at all. Wondering at mysteries could drive the best detective to insanity, in her humble opinion. It certainly did Poppy. Not that she compared her sleuthing to actual detective work. But all the same.

Her gaze found James, who had, in fact, not followed Derek but retreated in the opposite direction as his brother and the Russian countess. His shoulders were stiff, and tension bled from his every pore. No, Poppy did not want to merely wonder at mysteries. Especially not the mystery that was James Shaw. Him, Poppy would very much like to crack.

James marched up the short, winding stairwell that led to the box Florence had reserved for the evening in one hell of a mood. Behind him, Derek caught up at a slower, more relaxed pace, though his brother was anything but. He was strung tight, just as tight as James.

Derek now knew James had had a run-in with Madeline and hadn't told him. He had planned on informing Derek in due course. The decision had seemed like the best one—get through the play, remain

focussed and alert, then deal with what happened later.

Never had he thought Madeline would blindside him here, tonight. Neither had he counted on Derek coming along with him. But Derek had taken one look at James as he departed for the theatre earlier, snatched up his hat and coat, and strode out after him. James hadn't said a word on their way over to reassure his brother, either. Hadn't needed to. Derek would relax once James relaxed. They were like that.

But apparently, his brother's patience had limits, for he asked, "Madeline is the reason you were in such a sodding mood. Why didn't you tell me?"

James sighed. "I wished to get through the evening first." They arrived at their box and each settled into a seat, the space between them brimming with tension.

"She had her footman follow you."

Dammit! How had James not picked up on the tail?

You are too distracted.

"I'm surprised she recognized me at all," James growled.

Derek said nothing for a moment, then, "She wants to have dinner together."

"Not happening."

"Do you not think it's the least we can do? That way, her harassment will stop."

James's head whipped to Derek. "The least we can do? *Nothing* is the best we can do, Derek. Why the hell the sudden change of mind?"

Derek shrugged. "She is not the monster my memories had contorted her into. She is just a woman."

"That is bullshit. Just because she doesn't resemble the queen of hell doesn't mean her heart isn't made of brimstone."

"It was merely a suggestion."

"Well, stop suggesting shite that infuriates me."

James's gaze searched for the box Poppy occupied, found hers to be across from theirs on the lower tier. The pulsating anger burning in his chest lifted a margin. He might as well stare at her rather than the play since his usual iron focus was shattered to hell anyway. Now he could only be grateful Derek had decided to join him. Someone had to be alert.

Poppy looked dazzling in a gown of French lavender silk taffeta, swathing her curves to perfection. The color brought out the depth of blue in her gaze, yet their focus had been on everything but him.

His fingers curled into a ball and he fisted them on his lap. She was mad, and that was not a good thing. An angry Middleton was an unpredictable Middleton.

He ought to have known better, he supposed. But the thought of Poppy amid danger set his teeth on edge. Between Walker, Jennings,

and that bloody bastard Hargrove, James wanted her as far from the theatre as possible. He had thought if he gave her a wide berth, she would give up on this madness.

James should have known better.

His brother gave him a quick, brow-raising glance, and James turned his focus back to the play. *Bullocks*. The last thing he needed was his brother questioning his ability to remain neutral on this case yet again. Truth be told, James was questioning his ability himself.

"We have to talk about her sometime."

Her? Ah, their aunt.

"I'm not interested in discussing my feelings about Madeline's return to London."

"I am not referring to Madeline."

James just barely caught himself from glancing at Poppy in response. He clenched his jaw. *Hard*. He was not talking to Derek about Poppy Middleton. But he did have to talk to Poppy.

How bloody long until the interval?

"James?" Derek insisted.

"Nothing to talk about. Madeline, on the other hand, might be a problem."

"I'll handle her."

"Don't think she will be that easily handled."

"Women never are."

Charlotte came onto the stage, and Derek motioned to her with a curious glance. "Perhaps I should have a talk with Miss Rose after the play?"

"I can handle this case."

"I don't doubt your ability, James. Madeline's return has us both out of sorts. It won't hurt to put our heads together on both accounts."

James grunted. A bloody lifetime passed before the interval started. James was out of his seat, striding from their box.

"James." Derek slowly rose. "We should talk."

"I'm not a child," James tossed over his shoulder. "I can handle her."

"Are you sure?"

No.

But one toilsome woman at a time.

Derek said nothing, and his silence cried volumes. James didn't look back as he left the box. He felt confident no one from the theatre would approach him as long as he avoided Florence. Anyone else who would know him as Mr. Greenwich was backstage.

He did not have to search long.

He found Poppy amidst the crowd in conversation with Lady Westfield. Just his luck.

“Ladies,” he murmured as he approached.

Lady Westfield’s grin was instant. Poppy’s smile did not quite reach her tempestuous eyes. Yes, she was certainly furious at him. Unquestionably knew he had avoided her. And by the look of her unapologetic ire, she was not going to let him get away with the slight.

“Shaw,” Lady Westfield greeted. “How do you find the play so far?”

“Riveting,” James drawled. “Miss Rose is a jewel.”

“She is, is she not,” Lady Westfield said. “I’m quite enthralled myself.”

“Lady Westfield!” A woman with peacock feathers in her hair suddenly appeared to pull Lady Westfield’s focus away, leaving James free to converse with Poppy.

“We must talk,” he said in a low voice.

“I cannot imagine what we have to say to each other.”

James grimaced at the sweet bite in her voice. “About the past two days—”

“Ah, yes,” she interrupted with a slight wave of her hand. “Something does seem to come to mind. No matter, I understand, Mr. Shaw. Nothing more to say.”

James knew better than to take her words to heart.

“I understand now that an alliance between us was a mistake,” she continued in a whisper. “From this moment forward, you conduct your business, and I shall finish mine. That seems to be how you would prefer it to be after all.”

“That is not—”

“How is your brother enjoying the play?” she interrupted sweetly as a couple passed them. “Miss Rose’s performance is splendid, do you not agree?”

“Poppy,” he murmured low.

“I, for one, found Mr. Marks writing heart-wrenching.”

“Dammit. I—”

“Cannot have anything more to say.”

“Stop bloody interrupting me,” he growled low. “I don’t want you to get hurt, which is the only inevitable outcome if you continue on this path.”

“I can look after myself, James.”

“Not with Walker. Not in this.”

“Who was the woman we met earlier?” she countered. “How are you connected to a Russian Countess?”

“She’s not Russian, and what the devil does she have to do with anything?”

“If my business is yours, then surely yours must be mine.”

“She is no one important to me. Now can you please stop being difficult?”

“I’m being nothing of the sort. You seemed pretty important to her. I find myself intrigued.”

“Don’t. I mean it, Poppy. And don’t go snooping around Jennings either. I *will* compromise my disguise if it means keeping you safe.”

James watched as Poppy’s lips parted, but before she could say anything, Lady Westfield joined them once more. Her gaze flicked uncertainly between them. “Is everything alright? You are not arguing, are you?”

“Belle,” Poppy admonished. “Only you will interrupt a conversation so candidly. Alas, Mr. Shaw and I do not agree on Mr. Marks’s performance. He believes his acting bland.”

“Oh,” Lady Westfield said. “I cannot say I agree.”

“Neither can I.”

“A good thing,” James said, tamping down the urge to drag Poppy away and shake some sense into her. “Imagine what world we would live in if everyone was of the same mind.”

Chapter 13

Poppy watched as James excused himself and stalked off. He seemed more out of sorts than usual, which was saying a lot. In the short time of their acquaintance, both two years ago and these last few days at the theatre, she'd always known and understood him to be cool and collected. In the few times their paths have crossed, Poppy had never seen James Shaw so rankled before.

Poppy frowned at his back.

She wanted to go after him despite her earlier conviction to avoid him. What had happened in the two days she'd seen him last? Did his mood have something to do with the case? The Russian Countess?

Curiosity stirred.

However, aware of Belle at her side, Poppy kept a smile determinedly fixed on her face and refrained from marching after James to demand answers. It was a kind of torture to keep her instincts in check.

"He seems to be in a mood," Belle said. "I wonder why."

"It appears so." Poppy lifted the corners of her mouth. She would rather not encourage a conversation about James Shaw. "Shall we return to our box?"

Belle nodded, and with one last glance over Poppy's shoulder, they set off. Just as well. Poppy didn't have time to dwell on James's troubles. She had precious little time before her sisters returned to London. When they did, Poppy would have to lay to bed her short sprint as Charlotte. And Shaw had already wasted two days of that precious time.

They had just entered their box when a man, one Poppy recognized as a footman of her cousin's household, rushed in after them. "Your ladyship! I thought I'd never find you!"

"Millerton?" Belle questioned with a startled frown. "What are you doing here? Has something happened to William? Is he alright?"

"Master William is in good health, my lady. His lordship sent me. He wishes for your hasty return."

"Whatever for?" Belle questioned, the crease between her brows deepening. "Surely he is not interrupting my evening for trivial matters."

Poppy chuckled. "Seems like Westfield is having problems playing governess."

"How ridiculous," Belle said with a huff. "William should be in bed sleeping. What on earth can Westfield be having trouble with?" She directed the last at Millerton.

Millerton squirmed. "His young lordship has refused to go to bed,

my lady.”

“Are you telling me that Westfield can’t put his own son to bed?”

The footman blanched. “That’s not what I—er—that we . . .”

“Why do I suspect,” Poppy drawled amused, eyeing the poor man with sympathy. “Westfield is not the only person who has tried?”

The footman flushed.

“Well, Millerton,” Belle said, her hands settling on her waist. “You can tell my husband he shall just have to figure out a way.”

Sweat gathered on Millerton’s brow. “I’m not to return without you, my lady.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Poppy bit her lip to keep from laughing.

“That was his lordship’s instruction, my lady.”

“Well, I never!” Belle exclaimed. “I suggest you take a seat, Millerton, for I might still be a while.”

“Are you sure, Belle?” Poppy murmured with a chuckle. “It seems Westfield is in desperate need of you.”

“He is a grown man.” Belle shook her head. “What is he thinking, uprooting our evening? He must know I cannot leave you unchaperoned.”

Poppy shrugged. “You do not have to be long. Slip out, see to William, I know you must be dying to, and come back. I shall be here,” Poppy motioned to the velvet interior of the box, “right where you left me.”

Belle hesitated. “It will still be highly improper.”

“Leave Millerton then, if you feel uncomfortable. He shall watch over me diligently, I’m sure.”

Belle’s nod was slow in coming. “I suppose that will do. But are you sure?” she insisted. “It is still not exactly proper.”

Poppy gave her cousin an incredulous look—*really*.

“Oh, very well. It’s not the least improper thing we have ever done.”

Poppy nodded. “And no one shall ever find out. You will be back before the play ends. Perhaps even in time for the ending.”

Belle grinned. “Thank you, cousin. I shall return before you know it.” She turned to Millerton. “Is the carriage waiting outside?”

The footman nodded.

“Good, stay here, I shall be back shortly.”

“Of course, my lady.”

“Don’t be too hard on Westfield,” Poppy rejoined.

Belle harrumphed. “We shall see.”

Poppy grinned as Belle slipped from the box and Millerton faded into the shadows. She turned her attention back to the stage with effort. All her eyes wanted to do was dart to one particular box, which

she had succeeded in avoiding while Belle was present, but now proved infinitely harder to resist.

But resist she did.

Poppy congratulated herself on her self-discipline.

Charlotte came on stage singing the most haunting melody. A thrill shot through her veins. Poppy felt giddy with pride. Her friend was truly talented. Poppy had known that, of course, but seeing it was another experience altogether.

Poppy hadn't even blinked away the thought when an ominous crack intruded into Charlotte's spell. A sharp snap sent chills down Poppy's spine. She half rose from her seat, alert.

Then it happened.

A beam swung from above Beatrix, arrowing straight towards the actress's head.

Poppy cried out in warning, but her voice was drowned in the sea of cries that washed over the auditorium. She shot up and dashed from the box, heart in her throat. Vaguely, she heard Millerton call out to her, but she had no time to spare.

Poppy headed straight to the back of the stage. She didn't care if anyone saw her or recognized her. Her friend might be severely injured. Mortally, even.

Please, Lord, don't let Beatrix be hurt.

Fingers gripped her arm in a powerful hold, and Poppy whirled around with a gasp.

"You are not going back there."

Derek Shaw stared down at her, his face an unreadable mask. She blinked up at him, momentarily dazed. He was by far the more intimidating of the brothers. Unlucky for him, Poppy was not easily intimidated. She attempted to twist out of the hand that clasped her, but it held firm.

She narrowed her eyes on him. "You do not tell me what to do, Shaw."

"Not that Shaw, anyway," James answered, his voice coming from behind her. Poppy whipped to him. Butterflies brushed her chest. "But you will listen to me."

Wedge between two powerful, towering men, Poppy ought to have felt daunted. Not so. Her temper sparked. "Get out of my way, James. My friend needs me."

"You will only draw more attention to her and yourself. I heard you cry out across the auditorium."

"Everyone cried out," Poppy said defensively.

"This incident will hit the scandal sheets by morning. Do you want your name plastered there as well?"

"I don't care about gossip. Beatrix—"

“Derek will see to Miss Rose.” James nodded to Derek, who slipped past them and down the hall.

“*Your brother?* And just how is he going to do that?” Poppy snapped. Then it occurred to her. “You told your brother.”

A single nod.

“This is unacceptable.” She glared at the looming rogue and moved to march past him, but he stopped her with his hand. “You will not keep me from my friend, James! She doesn’t know your brother.”

“Do not test me, Miss Middleton. You are in over your ears in things you ought not to be.”

“No, Shaw, do not test *me*,” Poppy hissed.

“Dammit! Can you listen for once in your life?”

“Miss Middleton?” A dim voice called for her. Both Poppy and James stilled.

“Millerton!” Poppy exclaimed on a gasp.

“Who the hell is Millerton?” James demanded.

“Belle’s footman. She stepped out for a moment. Westfield is in crisis at home.”

James cursed and shrugged out of his jacket.

“What are you doing?” She demanded when he leaned over to drape it over her head.

Poppy hissed out a breath as she was suddenly caught in his arms and hauled over his shoulder.

Lord Above!

James Shaw had utterly lost his mind!

James’s brutish hide was still being cursed when he deposited Poppy in his carriage and rapped on the roof. She yanked his jacket from her head as the vehicle shot forward.

“You are a dead man, Shaw!” she hissed at him. “How dare you claim *I* will draw attention and then go and cause a scene of your own making?”

“No one recognized you.”

“And just what am I supposed to tell my cousin when she returns? Millerton must be ill with worry.”

“Tell her you went home. That is the truth.”

“And what if Charlotte is hurt and I am not there for her? Belle knows Charlotte is my friend. She won’t believe I just left.”

“Then tell her I dragged you home. She will understand. And the beam missed Miss Rose.” *Damn narrowly.* “Jennings and Marks both knocked her out of the way.”

“They did? She is unharmed?”

“Winded, I’d imagine, but otherwise, Miss Rose is fine from the

looks of it.”

“Why didn’t you begin with that from the start? Lord, I nearly went into shock.”

“Had you not argued with me, I’d have told you.”

She shot him a glare, but said nothing.

“So, Miss Rose’s name is Beatrix.”

Miss Middleton’s eyes widened. “How do you know her name?”

“You parted with it in your haste to reach her.”

Her brows scrunched. “I did?”

James nodded. “You were distraught, understandably so. It was an honest slip.”

A look of horror crossed her features. As if she could not imagine a more dreadful statement.

“*Understandable*? She is going to be furious with me. Do you think anyone else overheard?”

James shook his head. She seemed so put out, he took pity on her. “Derek and I make a living off keeping secrets, Miss Middleton. Miss Rose’s is safe in our care.”

“I’m still furious with you. You have been avoiding me for two days. Why did you have to stop now?”

“Do you think Marks and Jennings so slow that they’d not draw connections between you and Charlotte once they glimpsed you together? You might have them fooled so far, Miss Middleton. But that will not always be the case.”

“What about your brother? How will he explain his presence?”

James shrugged. “He is my brother. In this case, the other Mr. Greenwich as far as anyone from the theatre is concerned. Perhaps you have forgotten, but we are the experts. You and Miss Rose are not. Which begs the question. What have the two of you been up to these past two days that I’m not aware of?”

“Nothing, I have been waiting for *you*, if you recall.”

“This is a serious matter, Miss Middleton. Your friend might have been deliberately attacked.”

“I know that! Nothing happened, at least not that I’m aware of.”

“You shouldn’t return to the theatre.” James made it a statement.

“We have been over this, Shaw. Tonight might have been an accident. How will it look if I suddenly stayed away?”

“You are not the real Charlotte Rose,” James growled. “Or have you forgotten that?”

She averted her gaze, and James once again cursed how he had handled the matter. But dammit, that snap of the beam, its fall to the stage, he had never felt such dread in his life. Not for Miss Rose, though he was eternally grateful she was unscathed, but that Miss Middleton was now in true danger.

If this had been a deliberate attack, how the hell was he going to convince her to forgo this ruse?

"I want to return to the theatre. I want to see her unharmed myself."

"Not happening. The footman will reach Lady Westfield soon, and she will come in search of you. If she doesn't find you at home, she will become worried."

She sighed in response. He'd already broken her trust by avoiding her. She now seemed determined to cut him from her mind and her activities. James couldn't allow that. Not yet. Not until they knew for certain tonight had been an accident. Then he'd retrieve that bloody necklace for Miss Rose and the women could go back to their respective lives and allow James to continue his investigation without distraction.

"Did you notice anything out of the ordinary tonight?" James asked. He hadn't. But then he had been preoccupied.

"Yes," she snapped. "It's large. Wooden. Deadly."

James groaned. He stepped right into that one. "You know that is not what I meant."

"What I know, Shaw is your words rarely match your meaning."

"I did what I thought best."

"We worked together once before."

"And look how well that went," James snapped. "London was nearly set on fire along with your life."

"This is different."

"How?"

"There is no potential for an accidental explosion involved."

James's gaze touched Poppy. The underlining tone in her voice raised the hairs on the back of his neck. She was not letting this go. Did not see the danger. Not the full extent of it.

Dammit, he'd have to keep a hawkish eye on her. Lord, how he wanted to take her into his arms and kiss the frown gathering on her face away.

"Why did your brother join you this evening?" she suddenly asked, taking James aback.

"It's a long story."

"Does it have to do with that woman?"

James sighed. "That woman is our aunt," he admitted. He didn't know why. Perhaps he sensed things were about to change. Already the grip of Madeline's deeds did not feel as hefty as before.

"Your *aunt*?"

James could practically see the wheels of Miss Middleton's mind spinning.

"You did not seem pleased to see her," she observed.

“She abandoned us fifteen years ago, there is nothing to be pleased about.”

“I’m sorry. That is dreadful.”

“Don’t be. It’s in the past.” He glanced out into the night. “Where she ought to have bloody stayed.”

“Family is rarely ever that simple,” she said, drawing his gaze back to her face. “You should hear what she has to say.”

“And what will that do except dredge up old wounds?”

“Maybe nothing, but perhaps, if you are lucky, old wounds will heal.”

If only it were that simple.

But things of the heart rarely ever were.

Chapter 14

Poppy dashed down the abandoned street under the cover of darkness with swift strides. She pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders. The evening had grown chilly, but Poppy wasn't sure whether that had to do with Beatrix's incident or the cold breeze. After James had deposited her home, no matter how much she thought about it, tried to explain it away as an accident, there seemed to be no other explanation for the accident than for it to have been deliberate.

It *felt* deliberate.

The equipment was checked beforehand by the staff. The rehearsals had all proceeded without a hitch. How then, on the grand opening night, had such a dreadful occurrence transpired?

No, Poppy thought darkly as she quickened her pace, *Someone in Regent Theatre did this.*

But who? And why?

Could this Walker James was investigating have discovered Beatrix was the owner of the necklace? Something did not feel right about that. And Jennings did not seem like a bad fellow to Poppy. He did not appear like the sort that would be part of a diabolical plot.

Perhaps it was time to find out the exact details of what James was investigating. Yes, she knew about the whispered plot. But who was Walker? Why did he plan a riot? Just how significant was the danger to Beatrix, and to Poppy who was playacting the part?

But first things first, Poppy had to make sure Beatrix was unhurt.

James ought to be institutionalized if he thought that there was any way Poppy would not call on her friend. She would never be able to sleep. But he had been right on one account—Belle had sought her out. Her cousin had been beyond worried, and after learning no one was hurt, peeved she had missed all the action. Poppy would not be surprised if Westfield got another earful.

Her mind still spun whenever she thought back on the events that evening. James. Beatrix. The Aunt. It seemed awfully odd that James even had an aunt. Poppy had always thought them to be, well, just *them*. The Shaw Brothers against the world. Which was a ridiculous assumption. Of course, they had a family. Everyone had family. Though it didn't seem as though they cherished theirs.

Poppy turned onto Westbourne Green, and moments later, rapped on Beatrix's door. It swung open two minutes later.

"Poppy?" Beatrix filled the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Did you expect me to stay away? Are you hurt? James said the beam missed you."

Beatrix tugged her inside. "I'm a bit winded, but otherwise

unharméd. How did you get here? Did you walk? It's the dead of night!"

"Of course, I walked. The last I saw was a wooden beam crashing down on you before Shaw removed me from the theatre." Poppy scowled.

"A good thing he did, I suppose," Beatrix said and led Poppy to the parlor with a hobble. "Come, I was enjoying a glass of port. Join me."

"You *are* hurt!" Poppy exclaimed and rushed to her friend.

Beatrix waved her concern away and motioned for her to sit. "Jennings and Marks crashed into me at the same time. I'm a bit bruised, but nothing too painful."

Poppy plonked down into a chair and accepted the port Beatrix offered her. She took a healthy sip, then asked, "What happened, do you know?"

"It seems a rope snapped. Mr. Marks is investigating the matter. Production is closed until the set is fixed. I imagine one or two nights at most. I've been ordered to rest until then."

"Good. You *should* rest," Poppy said. "What do you figure about Jennings saving you?"

"Marks saved me as well."

"Yes, but *Jennings*."

"I don't know Poppy, what if I was wrong? Jennings does not seem like a man to be part of a diabolical plot. I may have wasted Bow Street's time."

"I don't believe you have. Are you sure it was Jennings you overheard?"

Beatrix nodded. "Yes, I am sure. But I only overheard part of their conversation. It might not be as we suspected. There might be more to the story. And tonight – tonight might have been an accident."

"You do not believe that."

"No, I suppose I do not." Beatrix looked away. "Poppy, this has taken a turn neither of us expected. Perhaps it is time for you, for us, to step back."

Poppy set her glass aside. "If you wish for me to stop play-acting as Charlotte, I will stop."

Beatrix sighed in resignation. "I don't want you to get hurt because of me. Let us see what Mr. Marks's investigation brings to light. Until then, it would be better for you not to return to the theatre as me."

"Very well." Poppy could not, however, promise she would not return as herself for one last attempt to find the necklace. Beatrix might not voice this, but her mother's heirloom meant the world to her. Poppy hated that they had failed to retrieve it. Hated that she'd been too distracted by James Shaw to search Jennings's room.

Poppy hated that she had failed.

After last night, Poppy doubted James would tolerate her presence at the theatre, and tomorrow was the perfect time to search Jennings's room. Everyone will still be distracted by the events of the grand opening. She might only have one last chance left to help Beatrix.

Poppy was not about to squander it.

She would search Jennings's room at dawn, long before he arrives at the theatre. If her search does not reveal any results, she would stand back and let Shaw handle the matter.

"Who is the man that came to me earlier? He resembled Mr. Greenwich and claimed to be his brother."

Poppy reached for her port. "Ah, yes. That was Mr. Shaw's twin brother, Derek Shaw."

"There are *two* of them?"

"Yes."

"They'd make quite the intimidating pair."

Poppy lifted her gaze to send Beatrix an apologizing look. "Beatrix, I made a blunder tonight. I blurted out your name before the brothers during the excitement of the evening."

Beatrix blinked, then widened her eyes. "My *real* name?"

"Well." Poppy flinched. "Not entirely. Only your first name."

Beatrix paled. "*Poppy*."

"They will not say anything," Poppy added hastily. "You can trust in that, Beatrix. Your secret will never be broken by them."

"Very well," Beatrix said tiredly. "I shall trust you on this."

"Thank you." Poppy took a sip of port.

"You are lucky you have them as friends."

Friends.

The word stuck in Poppy's heart like a sharp, pointy thorn.

James bloody knew it.

He had known the moment he had deposited Poppy Middleton safely at her home, she would not stay put.

So, he had stayed.

He had taken note of the Countess of Westfield's arrival, of her departure, of the stretch of silence following that, and then of the small shadow that had finally slipped from the house.

The woman would drive him to lunacy, James was sure. He was already half-mad for following her around when he ought to be at the theatre, chasing down all avenues that potentially led to Walker.

He had believed in his gut that Charlotte was the key to finding Walker, and in a way, she had been—she'd penned the letter to Bow Street. Beyond that, James wasn't so sure anymore.

He needed answers. He needed to interrogate Miss Rose and tap all

the information she had about that day. Where had she overheard the conversation between Jennings and presumably Walker? What were the exact words?

James wanted to hear it all from her own lips.

Until then, he could not be sure Walker was even involved in what she overheard. This might still be theatre rivalry. James would be bloody furious if that were the case.

He now stared up at the residence of Miss Rose, first name Beatrix. Yes, it would be only a matter of time before he had every detail on the elusive actress now. Which was why he hadn't stopped Miss Middleton from her late-night excursion but instead followed her. That infuriating woman had too many secrets. The time had come for James to regain the upper hand.

James inhaled deeply. The scent hit him before the soft footfalls of a man coming up behind him.

Wooden musk.

Derek.

James didn't turn. "Are you following me?"

"No."

James flicked him an understanding glance. "The actress?"

Derek nodded. They stood in silence a moment before he said, "She seems to be the heart of it all, does she not?"

Both those women were both at the heart of it. "Miss Rose is the witness."

"She does not understand her importance or the gravity of what she overheard."

"Correct me, brother," James drawled. "Do you not usually leave the grunt work to me?"

"You like the grunt work. It was all yours when there was only one Charlotte Rose. Two Charlottes require two sets of eyes. As is evident from tonight."

James nodded slowly. Derek was right. They could no longer afford to leave either of the two women unattended. "You appear quite calm considering this case is a bloody mess."

Derek inhaled and let out a steady breath. "The cards are shattered across the board. We hold a few, Jennings holds one, Walker holds another. Then there are the women. Hell. They have no cards, so to speak, and yet somehow they manage to cleave to advantage."

"They know more than us, yes, but not after tonight. It is time to sit down with Miss Rose and have a long, overdue talk."

"She is suspicious of me."

James glanced at Derek. "Ordered her about, did you?"

"Tried to. She dismissed me completely."

James chuckled. "I've been reminded that we are as different as

night and day. Seems a subtle approach would have been more effective."

"Not my style."

James shrugged. "Shall we knock?"

Derek shook his head. "Give them this night. Tomorrow we take back control of the situation."

James scrutinized his brother's face. Was Derek worried about the case? Or did he merely believe the two women were too much to manage alone? "Are you optimistic we will find Walker this time?"

"We will. One way or the other. No more surprises."

James almost chuckled at that. Derek thought he could issue a command and no one and nothing would dare break it. But one person in their lives seemed quite willing to do so.

"What about Madeline? You still feel we should all dine like the happy family we are?"

"No, I'll talk to her. Set things straight."

"And if she insists?"

"I'll insist harder."

James nodded. He never wanted a repeat of tonight. If Madeline planned on staying in London, then she better remain well within the bounds of her half of it.

Dammit, why the devil had he confessed the truth to Poppy? Perhaps he'd instinctively known she would never breathe a word of it to anyone. Maybe it was because they both seemed to live simultaneously within and without the bounds of society. She and James, their lives seemed to be tied together with each other's secrets.

"Tomorrow the women's ruses stop," Derek said, changing track back to the Charlottes. "Miss Middleton will return to her life."

"Short from taking a stick to the woman, there is no diverting her course. I tried."

"I didn't."

"Nor will you. I told you I will handle Miss Middleton."

A pause. "She is different than before."

"I know."

James had sensed the difference in her. She was not the flighty, bubbly woman he had met two years ago. She was more confident, more sophisticated. And yet, at the same, she was fundamentally uncertain.

Perhaps it was this uncertainty that drew James to her—he felt the same depth of uncertainty in himself. Because he, James Shaw, servant of the Crown, wholly confident and, when called for, deadly, was uncertain about his future.

If he indeed took the time to delve into the depth of that feeling, James was sure, beyond a doubt, he could trace the first impression of

it back to the moment he had met Poppy Middleton.

James didn't know whether that was the best thing or the worst possible thing that could happen to a man like him. And like all men in his station would do, he prayed he would never have the opportunity to face that truth.

Because he suspected he already knew the answer.

Chapter 15

The following morning Poppy inserted two hairpins into the dressing room lock that belonged to Elliot Jennings. She was dressed in a day dress of drab brown, gracefully inconsequential, and hopefully unnoticeable. No paint stained her face. The hour was ungodly early, thus ensuring nary a soul was present.

Poppy sent up a silent prayer that she would find Beatrix's necklace. She ought to leave it be, but Poppy could not help feel a measure of guilt that she had not helped her friend in the way she had wanted to. Searching Jennings's room would go a long way to ease the pang of conscience that she'd been too distracted by a certain man to be of any use.

Poppy silently cursed James Shaw.

Had he not completely shut her out, she'd not have lowered to such extremes.

Poppy had been confident she had won him over. In a way, she supposed she had. He hadn't forced her to leave the theatre or gone through with his threat to expose her if she did not comply. But, the beast had completely shut her out otherwise, refusing to combine their efforts.

Fine. James must do what he must do. But she had warned him.

He would, in all likelihood, be furious with her taking such a risk, but James could deal with his displeasure as he had dealt with everything else—ignore it.

She lowered to her haunches, brows knitting as she positioned the pins into place. Poppy had picked enough locks that this one was a breeze.

A soft click signaled success.

Poppy grinned.

"You know, Miss Middleton," a voice drawled from directly behind her. "Breaking into someone's private room is frowned upon. Considered a crime, even."

Poppy squelched the startled squeal that rose to her lips and rose in a whirl. James's strong, steady presence was so heady that she nearly sighed with pleasure at the very sight of him.

Immediately, she scowled.

Must she always feel this way in his presence?

"Lord! You gave me a fright."

His lips curled in displeasure. "What the hell do you think you are doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Poppy replied snipingly. She was in no mood to be scolded today. In no way would she allow him

to thwart her mission.

"You are breaking into a dressing room. Jennings's, I presume?"

"Points to you, Shaw. As you have completely shut me out, I will do things my way."

"I haven't shut you out," he denied. "I merely wished to protect you from marching headlong into danger."

What utter crock. And they both knew it.

Poppy had an unquenchable urge to throttle a Shaw.

"Protection by avoidance?" She raised her brow at him. "Well, then, protect away."

He just stared at her. "Why the devil must you make completing my duty so difficult?"

She blew out her breath in exasperation. "I'm not making anything difficult, Shaw. And I am certainly not your duty."

"You are right in that. But as your father is unaware of your little endeavors, it falls upon me to ensure your safety. And by refusing to stand aside, you are forcing me to look out for you while I should be hunting down a culprit."

"Speaking of the culprit, just who is this Walker you are searching for? Except plotting a riot, what else has he done?"

"Just know he is a dangerous man."

"Well, then we best retrieve the necklace as quickly as we can." She shot him an accusing glance. "You never sent word about Charlotte last night."

"I didn't see the need," he snapped. "Since you snuck out to visit her anyway."

Poppy's jaw slackened. "You spied on me?"

"I had a suspicion you would be up to no good. I was right. I followed you."

For heaven's sake! Now he knew where Beatrix lived, too? Poppy suspected it would not be long before James knew everything about Charlotte Rose. No doubt his brother was already fishing out all the information he could find on her friend.

Beatrix was going to strangle her. Poppy swallowed her annoyance.

In a swift motion, she turned and entered the dressing room, determined to ignore James's towering presence. Whether she'd succeed, she didn't know. It seemed that she was always painfully aware of him whenever he was near. And since their kiss, he didn't even have to be close. She felt him everywhere.

He cursed behind her. "Would you at least wait for me to enter first?"

"Why? The door was locked."

"That doesn't mean no one is in the room. Trust me, I know from

experience.”

Her mouth lifted at the corners despite her effort to remain stern. “The mighty James made a mistake?”

“I’m just a man,” he growled. “Do I even want to know where you learned to pick a lock?”

“My cousin Belle taught herself.” Poppy smiled over her shoulder. “And then she taught me.” Her eyes swept the room. “Then, I taught Beatrix.”

He spared her a dubious look. “You taught the actress to pick a lock? Whatever for?”

Poppy shrugged. “It’s a useful skill.”

“Only when you’re up to no good. What other locks have you picked, I wonder?”

“My father’s liquor cabinet.” Poppy shrugged.

“So you *drink* too? Mother of heaven.”

Poppy shook her head. “I was merely curious as to the taste of brandy. It’s revolting.”

He snorted. “Brandy is no drink for a woman. Does your father know he bred such a mischievous lot?”

“Of course, he knows. What is wrong with a bit of mischief?” Poppy sauntered over to a desk and yanked open the drawer. She frowned.

“Pretending to be an actress while you might be in grave danger is not mischievous, it’s downright reckless.”

“I’m not pretending any longer, am I?” Poppy opened another drawer. “It’s all empty.”

James came up behind her and looked over her shoulder. Warmth invaded her blood, and after an eternal second, she felt him move away to circle the room.

“Almost as if he is never here.”

Poppy’s gaze fell to a soft velvet sofa in the corner of the room, much like Charlotte’s. On it, folded neatly, a sheet and pillow. How odd. Poppy had seen Jennings toss aside his shirt at practice, which to her, did not suggest a man concerned about neatness. In this room, of the few articles that resided, none were out of place. For that matter, it did not appear as though anyone used this room at all.

“This is highly suspicious,” Poppy said.

“On that, Miss Middleton, we agree.”

Poppy traced her finger over the spine of a single book on Jennings’s writing table. She flipped it open distractedly. “Yet there is nothing to suggest anything underhanded.”

“There is nothing to suggest otherwise either.” Behind her, James suddenly cursed. “We are not going to find anything here.”

“You can tell that by one sweep of the room? Maybe there is a

hidden room.”

“I doubt it, and it’s too clean,” James said, circling the room. His hawk eyes seemed to miss no detail. “Jennings seems to be careful.”

Again, having spent a bit of time with Jennings that did not sit right with Poppy. But she couldn’t begin to explain that to James. Did not know how. It was a curious feeling, the one she had about Jennings. Perhaps even naïve. But it was there nonetheless. Poppy did not believe Jennings was a villain.

“Where on earth could the necklace be?” Poppy murmured offhandedly.

James cast a frown her way. “Derek has men tailing Jennings. He hasn’t been acting suspiciously.”

Poppy circled the room and motioned to the mostly empty space. “He also hasn’t been using this room.”

James opened his mouth to reply when the rumbling of voices reached them. Poppy’s gaze whipped to him. He placed a finger over his lips and grabbed her by the arm, dragging her to the back of the sofa. They hunkered down as the knob rattled, and the door swung open.

“I thought I locked it last evening,” they heard Jennings mutter.

Poppy bit her lip. She spared a startled glance with James. They were in the same position Beatrix had been when this all started.

Fate had a sense of humor, indeed.

The blood froze in James’s veins. Everything inside him stilled as all his senses went on alert. Jennings hadn’t come in alone. Could this be Walker?

James narrowed his eyes at the back of the sofa, almost as if he could penetrate the fabric and zone in on the two men on the other side. If it was Walker, this was the closest James had come to him in all his months of pursuit.

“What the hell happened last night?” a male voice asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jennings answered. “A rope snapped.”

“Was it done deliberately?” the man demanded.

James frowned. Beside him, he felt Miss Middleton go still.

“As far as I can tell, it was an accident—rotten luck.”

Is that so? James thought darkly.

“Are you sure?”

“If it was done purposefully, it could have been meant for me, Miss Rose, or Marks. A second later and both of us would have taken the stage. It was either damndest luck or a sloppy attempt on one of us.”

“Dammit, Jennings, such an event will draw the authorities. I cannot have that.”

We are already here, you son of a bitch.

"Just what the devil are you planning?" Jennings asked. "What exactly is it that you are storing?"

Didn't he know? But Miss Rose's missive had been clear. A Riot.

"The less you know, the better."

There was a short pause before Jennings spoke again. "What about the necklace? Have you discovered who it belonged to?"

"No. No one seems to recognize it, or they are damn good at disguising their reactions."

"It's our profession."

James inwardly cursed when he noticed Miss Middleton inch forward, aiming to peek up from behind the sofa. He stopped her with a tight grip on her shoulder. She shot him a heated look.

James shook his head slowly. It was a miracle he fit behind the damn sofa. If Miss Middleton compromised their position, he'd be forced to act. That could be disastrous. Dangerous. Lethal.

"Everything is in place like I asked?"

"Yes," Jennings said. "Everything is as you wished."

Miss Middleton made another effort to wiggle out from his hand, and James shifted to band his arms around her midriff, bringing her up to his chest, and hunching over. Awareness washed over him as the scent of violets soaked into his pores.

Every inch of him hardened.

Mighty Saints, not now.

When Miss Middleton froze, he knew she felt his body's betrayal. James cursed his cock. Of all the times to get randy, it chose now, where it was impossible to conceal from her.

"How long are you planning to stay? Jennings asked.

James's ears perked up.

"A few more days, no more. Everything is almost set."

"Dammit, Terrance, I want no part of any villainous acts of yours."

A smile curled James's lips.

Terrance Walker. *We have you now.*

"Do not forget who dragged you from the gutters, boy. If it weren't for me, you'd be nothing but the son of a whore."

"That may be, but you need *my* help. Do not push me."

So Elliot Jennings wasn't part of Walker's plan after all. Neither was he a follower to the cause or taking Walker's *shite*. Begrudging respect rose for the man.

Yet, if people got hurt, it would be on the actor too. Jennings was an accomplice, knowingly or not. He secretly housed a criminal and his silence was problematic in and of itself.

Movement, followed by two sets of footsteps and the soft shut of the door signaled the men's departure. James waited until he heard

the lock click into place before letting out a breath.

A count of five and he finally let go of a wiggling Miss Middleton. She scrambled from his hold and surged to her feet.

"Dear Lord," she exclaimed, face averted. "That was positively enthralling!"

"Enthralling?" James sent her an incredulous look. "Have you lost your mind? Do you not grasp the danger?"

Her large blue eyes turned to him, and he glimpsed the slight flush that stained her cheeks. "Are you armed?"

He frowned. "No."

"But you are skilled in your field."

"Of course."

She broke out into a smile. "Skill and bodyweight. There was no need for me to be afraid."

James blinked down at her.

This woman.

She raised a finger to her chin. "Well, that was quite informative. I knew I was not wrong about Jennings."

"Excuse me?" James snapped.

She lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug. "I had my doubts about him from the start."

"And you didn't care to share that with me?"

"Would you have listened?"

James bit down on his jaw.

A sudden noise outside the room made her jump. Right into James's arms.

"Should we hide again?" she asked in an urgent whisper.

James listened intently. "No, I do not think so. We should leave."

"Finally, something we agree on."

"Then you best let go of my coat lapels," James drawled. "And go pick the lock again."

James felt her gasp.

She was close enough to still the very breath from him when she sharply inhaled. She leaped away, but he caught her, arms circling her waist to bring her back up against him. Her eyes widened, and James was struck by her beauty as he had two years ago.

"I find I like your hands on me." He couldn't resist the quip, but a moment later the deep-seated need inside him, the urge to possess her, overwhelmed him. His body awakened in a thousand different ways, and James's control shattered.

He crushed his lips against hers.

She didn't pull away. Did not hesitate. Instead, she leaned into him, her arm coming around to encircle him in an embrace. Her lips were soft and pliant. James groaned.

Bloody hell, she tasted sweet. Forbidden.

She tasted like his ruin.

His body shuddered as her fingers dug into his back, pulling her closer to him. Desire, swift and fierce, erupted low in James's gut. He lifted her up against him, growling as he swept his tongue into the warmth of her mouth. His cock hardened, strained against his breeches. He wanted her *closer*.

Abruptly, almost miraculously, his senses returned.

They were in a dressing room. *Jennings'* dressing room. Bloody hell. Jennings and Walker could walk in on them at any minute. He set her back on her feet, and steeling his muscles, took a step back for good measure. He felt the loss of her touch as swift as a blow to his chest.

"I should not have done that." He meant to sound polite. Instead, he came off edgy. Testy. Brooding. "We should leave. Now."

Chapter 16

I should not have done that.

Poppy was still pondering the statement when James shut the carriage door in her face. She scowled when he ordered the driver to take her home. He was such an arrogant, hot-headed beast setting her aside like this. She could have boxed his belligerent ears. Why did he insist on treating her like a wayward child?

The stab of disappointment confused her. The feeling spreading through her was unwelcome. Why had he kissed her if he was only going to get upset about it?

She wasn't upset.

Lord, how could she be with those lips?

They were satiny. Demanding. Utterly irresistible. Poppy had felt the weight of his desire in that kiss. Even before, hiding behind the sofa, his body had reacted much like hers. Heat had pooled at her core.

James Shaw found her desirable.

That both surprised and thrilled Poppy. She had been the one to kiss him first. And that had been calculated, even if she found him thoroughly dashing. This time, he had kissed her, and she hadn't been in any sort of disguise. It had been as if he had kissed Poppy for, well, Poppy.

Which was why his curt dismissal stung.

Perhaps she *would* box his ears when she saw him again. She blinked a few times and changed her train of thought. She did not want to think about the beast at present. Poppy would rather solve the mystery that was Elliot Jennings.

It felt good to have been right about him, even though the actor was not entirely innocent.

Poppy replayed the gripping incident with Jennings and Walker in her mind. She must be going crazy, but she could have sworn she caught sight of skirts in the brief glimpse she managed from behind the sofa. But that couldn't be right, could it? It must have been a trick of the light. James had hauled her back so fast.

Her brows scrunched together as she recalled Jennings uncertainty over the snapped beam. He believed it either an accident or, if done purposefully, could have been meant for any one of them—Marks, Jennings, Charlotte. Did that mean there was another villain at large?

Poppy hoped not.

One was quite enough.

The carriage drew to a halt, and Poppy sighed. She waited for the driver to let her out, but when the door swung open, it wasn't the

driver, but Beatrix, fully attired as Charlotte, who poked her head inside.

Poppy opened and closed her mouth. "Beatrix?"

"I followed you from the theatre," Beatrix admonished. "You were not supposed to return there."

"I know, Beatrix. I'm sorry, but I had to at least try one last time."

Beatrix sighed. "I saw Mr. Shaw deposit you in the carriage and send you off. I also saw Jennings and Mrs. March. Did they catch you? It didn't seem like it, but I had to make sure."

Poppy frowned, pulling Beatrix into the carriage and shutting the door. "You saw Jennings with Mrs. March?"

Beatrix nodded. "Did something happen?"

Poppy explained what transpired in Jennings's room. "We still do not know who this man is."

"I am of no help. I didn't see Mr. Jennings with a man, only Mrs. March."

Poppy tilted her head, a possibility forming her mind. "Are you sure there was no else besides them?"

Beatrix nodded. "I'm certain."

"What is Mrs. March's full name?"

"Temperance March."

"Temperance March. . ." Poppy repeated slowly.

Terrance Walker. "Dear Lord, Beatrix! I think I solved the mystery."

Beatrix leaned forward in her seat. "What is it?"

"We overheard the other man's name is Terrance Walker." Poppy inhaled deeply, eyes fixing on her friend. "Terrance, Temperance. Walker, March. Beatrix, Terrance Walker is Temperance March."

"I don't know, Poppy. The names do seem like an incredible coincidence."

Poppy's mind raced. The silent woman reading the book next to Jennings. Jennings sparring with Marks and making a belated comment about storage. The skirts she thought she had imagined in Jennings's dressing room.

"Coincidence or not, Beatrix, there is only one way to find out."

"How?" Beatrix asked with a small frown.

Poppy rapped on the roof. "Driver! Take us back to the theatre."

"Please tell me we are not going to confront Mrs. March?"

"Of course not, that would be dangerous if my suspicions prove correct. Marks made an offhanded comment about Jennings using the theatre's storage. I did not think much of it at the time but if Jennings is helping Walker, unknowingly or not, the answer lies there."

"Should we not send for Mr. Shaw?"

Poppy shook her head. He would only send her home. Would dismiss her hunch. And, "I could be wrong. It's a rather far-fetched

theory, I suppose. But if I am right, we shall send for him. Do you know where the basement of storage is located? We have precious little time to waste.”

Beatrix nodded. “I’ve been there once. I should be able to find it without trouble.”

True to her word, Beatrix led them straight to the basement when they arrived at the theatre. The building was empty of any workers.

Poppy followed right on Beatrix’s heels, heart beating hard in her throat. Her fingers tingled and the hairs on the back of her neck rose. The basement was wet and murky, and a foul smell sat within the walls, as if creatures had died and rotted here. Crates were stacked everywhere, some covered in dusty cloth and others not.

“What are we looking for?” Beatrix whispered.

“I don’t know. Anything suspicious,” Poppy said, marching to a stack of crates and lifting the cloth to peek inside. Books and props were all she found.

A gasp from Beatrix drew her gaze over to her friend, on the opposite side of the crowded space.

“Poppy,” she breathed.

Poppy hurried over to peer inside the crate Beatrix was gawking at, and let out a startled gasp of her own.

Double Barrel Flintlocks.

“Are those props?” Poppy asked.

“No,” Beatrix breathed.

A chill shot down Poppy’s spine.

They searched all the crates in the west corner, fear mounting in Poppy as each container revealed the horrid truth of their content.

Hundreds.

There were hundreds and hundreds of pistols.

“This is much worse than we imagined,” Poppy whispered.

Beatrix had spoken of beheading as a metaphor. What Poppy saw with her own eyes wasn’t far from that. Whoever these crates belonged to, they could very likely attempt to topple a government. Should the government be caught unaware . . .

“I still can’t believe you put together that Mr. Jennings is storing contraband for this reprobate.”

“How exactly,” a voice drawled from the shadows, “did you put it together?”

James scowled at the sight before him.

It was unexpected, unwanted, and bloody unwelcome. His body, still on fire from what transpired with Poppy, chilled to the bone with each passing second.

Madeline, along with his brother, slowly rose from their cozy little nest in the drawing room. This was James's Home. Derek's home. A sanctuary. Not hers to intrude upon.

"What the hell is she doing here?" James demanded from his brother, lips curling up in displeasure. He glared at Derek, but his brother's face remained clear of any emotion.

"James," Madeline said, tears gathering in her eyes. "I was just telling your brother how you have grown up into strong, capable men."

"Did you not, days ago, berate us through our solicitor for our choices?"

A blush stained her cheeks. "I admit, I spoke out of anger then."

James curled his lip upward at the statement. But since his aunt was here, he had some questions. "How did you recognize me in the first place? It's been fifteen years."

She lowered her lashes. "You look just like your father."

James flinched. Not what he wanted to hear. No more questions for Madeline. He looked at Derek. "What is she doing here?"

"Perhaps you should sit," Derek suggested.

Not bloody happening. Derek had said he'd handle Madeline, yet here she was.

Well, he'd give his brother *some* credit. At least this was no dinner.

"I merely wish to talk, James," Madeline said in Derek's defense. "I didn't give Wolverton any choice."

Both men jerked at the title.

"I found your home on my own," she went on. "He was just as surprised at my arrival as you and had no choice but to accept me."

"I fairly doubt that. Derek doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do."

"You may turn me away, James, but will you turn away my son?"

A thousand lashes to his back could not have prepared James for the jolt of pain shooting through his spine.

And here it was.

The true reason she sought them out.

"I want you to meet your nephew."

James shut his eyes.

"Wolverton won't agree to a meeting without you, James. Please, he is your family."

His eyes snapped open at that. "You mean he is in line for the dukedom if Derek or I don't provide heirs, as *family* could not possibly mean anything to *you*, a woman who abandoned hers fifteen years ago," James growled. Madeline paled. He spared no mercy. "And never use that title in our presence."

"You know why I had to leave."

"I know why you left. Whether you *had* to do it is still a matter for debate."

"You were young men when I left."

"We were seventeen—young, impressionable, with no parents. We needed family. We needed you."

Madeline blanched and glanced at Derek, who remained as stiff as a tree trunk. He kept his face averted. She would get no aid from him.

"I have no wish to meet your son," James announced.

Derek's gaze shifted to him, unreadable. This was what no one outside or inside their circle understood. They all thought James the mildest of the brothers because he always had a charming smile at the ready, whereas Derek said little, revealed even less with his stony mask of indifference. Yet behind each man's visage hid a deeper nature. A softer heart that enemies would take advantage of, or in James's case, a hardened heart that had lacked mercy too many times to count.

Derek said nothing, however, merely remained rigid as a statue waiting for James to set the course of their evening.

"He is your nephew," Madeline implored. "Surely that must mean something?"

"How old is he?" James demanded even though the answer already materialized in his head. "What is his name?"

"His name is Alexander Derek Demikov. He is nine years old."

"You gave him our family name?"

She nodded. "He is the firstborn."

"So for nine years he has lived a life without us," James growled. "Another nine years will not matter."

"How can you be so harsh? He is your nephew. You might be angry with me but my son is just a boy. If you will please sit, I will explain."

"I'm not in the mood, Madeline."

"I am *sick*, James. I have consumption." She paused. "I am dying. Alexander is going to need his uncles."

James shut his eyes. He felt prickles in the region of his heart, telling him he was bloody thawing. Madeline had just said the one thing that would give him pause. That could force him to reconsider. Neither he nor Derek could walk away from a woman or child in need. It went against their nature. Some found that to be courageous, at times. James thought it a burden more than not.

"What about your Russian family?"

She averted her face. "They never approved of me."

James fisted his hands. "Neither do we."

Derek shifted on his feet.

"How do we know you are not spinning a convenient tale?" James

was a bastard for asking, but he had to know, observed her face carefully as emotion flashed across her features.

“How dare you accuse me of lying, James? Do you know how long it took for me to come to terms with my illness? I am growing weaker by the day. The journey to England only worsened my condition. You wish to be angry with me, very well, but do not punish a small boy for my sins.”

James stiffened. She was right, dammit. And once he looked past his own grievances, the slight strain around her eyes, the pallor to her skin became all too indisputable.

“Please, meet him,” Madeline entreated, and James sighed.

“Fine, if Derek agrees to meet your son, I will, as well.”

The tension visibly eased from his brother. “It’s settled then. Set up a meet.”

James turned on his heel and strode from the room. “If you two will excuse me.”

“Wait!” Madeline called out. “I just arrived, James. We have much to discuss. Please stay awhile.”

James turned to them once more. He wanted to snap at her to leave him be, but he mistakenly made eye contact, and the hiss died on his tongue before reaching his lips.

He inhaled deeply. “We have agreed to meet the boy. Let’s leave it at that.”

“James—”

“Madeline,” Derek warned as she began to argue. “Let him go.”

Geoffrey, one of James’s trusted men, chose that suspenseful moment to burst into the drawing room, out of breath and deathly pale.

James felt the blood rush to his toes. Geoffrey had been tasked to follow Poppy. “What happened?” he demanded urgently.

Geoffrey glanced uncertainly at Madeline.

“James?” Derek advanced a step.

“Is she alright?” James growled, his whole attention on Geoffrey as crippling dread scorched his skin like hot water. “Dammit, spit it out man.”

“Sir—” Geoffrey’s answer was stolen by another man, Harrington, striding into the room, face grim. He was the man Derek had put on Miss Rose.

Harrington’s eyes flicked between Derek and James. “There’s been trouble at the theatre.”

James took off at a dead run.

Chapter 17

Thirty minutes earlier

So this was the man James was hunting.

This was Walker.

It was hard to look at the villainous figure swathed in a dress of soft blue, a matching bonnet on his head. It was even harder to keep a connection with his eyes. Her gaze dropped to his bosom. Poppy could not help it. The unnatural swell of those curves begged her attention. Had he padded them? They looked uncommonly real.

Even Poppy could not deny Walker possessed some rather delicate features. His long eyelashes for one. Not uncommon for men but rather desirable for women. His chin, too, appeared far less defined and more round, almost soft. He lacked any masculine definition in his jaw. Poppy could see why he got away with his disguise as a woman.

Jennings seemed to have lost all color at the sight of them.

“It is uncanny, right?” Walker said. “How a person can disguise themselves so easily into someone they are not. But I suspect you already know about that, madam.”

Poppy’s gaze shot up to Walker’s. “I have no clue what you may be referring to.”

His gaze traveled between her and Beatrix. His lips curled into a knowing smile. “Little escapes me.”

“On the contrary,” Beatrix said. “It seems a lot has escaped you, lately.”

A glint of fury flashed in his eyes. “It does seem that way, does it not? Yet here we are. Two little birds that have flown straight into a cage.”

“That is a matter of perspective, Mr. Walker,” Poppy said, deliberately using his last name. She knew only a momentary flash of fear before she lifted her chin in defiance, and offered him a small, forced smile. She had him, just as they had her. It was only a matter of the scales to tip in one party’s favor.

If Walker was rattled, he didn’t show it. His hand lifted to finger a purple gemstone that hung at his chest. Poppy’s brow dropped at the same time Beatrix stiffened.

The necklace.

She’d been so absorbed with his bust she hadn’t noticed the pendant dangling there.

“I see both of you recognize this splendid piece.”

Beatrix certainly did.

Poppy dragged in slow, careful breaths in an effort to calm her

mind and quell the tension that gripped her belly.

Danger thickened the air.

Tension charged the space between them. These were still men, dangerous and unpredictable, who could easily overpower two women.

Walker seemed to follow her train of thought, for his smile was a flash of white. And for the first time, Poppy took note of the masculinity of the act. No woman would have such a wolfish tilt to her smile.

"Nothing to say?" Walker questioned. "You've been so brave up until now." He motioned to Charlotte. "I thought whoever overheard Jennings and myself would keep their mouth shut. Not wise of you not to do so, Miss Rose."

"She only told me," Poppy told Walker.

"And yet, madam, shortly after our conversation was overheard a new patron arrives on the scene."

"How is that suspicious," Poppy demanded.

"I don't believe in coincidences, so I looked into Mr. Greenwich and low and behold, I could find no record of such a man. Highly suspicious if you ask me."

"Stranger things have happened, I am sure," Poppy said.

"Not to me. I have not evaded authorities this long by leaving anything to chance. So forgive me, but I believe Miss Rose told more than just you."

"I sent word to Bow Street," Beatrix declared to Poppy's surprise. "They have sent their best. Seeing what lies within these crates, I am glad I did."

"Beatrix!" Poppy hissed beneath her breath.

"What?" Beatrix hissed back. "They should know they will not get away with whatever dastardly deeds they have planned."

The less we reveal, the better, Poppy implored with A Look.

"And yet," Mr. Walker drawled. "I do not see Mr. Greenwich here."

Poppy snorted. "That is just because he is hunting on another trail, *Terrance*."

Walker's face flamed with outrage.

Really, Poppy, Beatrix's lifted brow said.

Poppy shrugged. *I am just giving your earlier declaration weight*, her eyes shot back. In hindsight, taunting the devil was probably not the best of ideas.

"The two of you have been caught," Beatrix added on agreement. "You will not get away with this."

"I am not part of this," Jennings said, having remained silent up until that moment. "Do not pen me in his corral."

"Are you not an accomplice? You are here, are you not?" Beatrix

snapped. "Eli, do you even know what is in these crates?"

Jennings's face flushed. "I was encouraged not to know."

"How convenient for you," Poppy said. "You are aiding a dangerous criminal, Mr. Jennings. The law does not take kindly to that."

"Dammit, Terrance, what *are* in those crates?"

"Pistols," Poppy answered for Walker. "Double barrel flintlocks to be exact. What do you believe your friend intends to use them for? How many people do you suppose will die?"

Jennings's face paled.

"What I am doing is much bigger than you or your runt from Bow Street," Walker growled. "I won't allow anyone to stand in my way."

"Shaw is not a runt!" Poppy exploded, fury overtaking any reasonable sense. "You cannot hope to win against him."

"Shaw? So that is Mr. Greenwich's real name."

Poppy clamped her mouth shut.

"You ought to really work on your name dropping, Poppy," Beatrix muttered beside her.

Poppy whipped to her, brow raised.

Beatrix covered her mouth in a gasp.

They'd make terrible spies.

Walker laughed an evil, sardonic sound. "Poppy and Shaw. What a fountain of information you are. I'm sure I can connect those names together. After all, all I have to do is enquire after your identity. I'm acquainted with quite a few of the attendants last evening. My connections run deep."

"So what if you know my name?" Poppy lifted her chin another notch and pretended that fact did not strike the fear of God in her. "We know who you are."

"But not for long."

"Walker?" Jennings questioned uncertainly.

"You know I cannot allow them to leave, Jennings. You must already have gathered that."

"That is outrageous, Walker. You cannot harm these women. Especially not a woman of the gentry."

"You believe she," Walker nodded to Poppy, "is a lady of standing?"

"I believe her manner of bearing tells me all I need to know. Let them go."

"I cannot do that."

Poppy slowly inched backward. She looked over to Beatrix and nodded to the exit as her fingers closed over a pistol behind her back. They would not be loaded, but she needed evidence to present to James when they escaped.

And they *would* escape.

Lord, James was going to throttle her, Poppy was sure.

"Then it is settled," Walker said, whipping Poppy's focus back to him. "I will take care of this Shaw fellow while you watch over the women. We will deal with them after I return."

Poppy's heart sank as Jennings nodded.

"Eli, you are a better man than this," Beatrix implored. "You can still come to the right side of it."

"Do not listen to their tricks," Walker countered. "And do not let them out of your sight."

"I won't," Jennings growled. "I won't let you hurt them either."

"Wait," Poppy called out when Walker gave them his back, skirts rustling. "What are you going to do to . . ." *James*, "him?"

He paused and glanced over his shoulder. "You know exactly what I'm going to do, madam." He turned to her fully then. "What did you believe would happen? That I'd just let the matter go? You have no clue to the lengths I have gone and will go to make certain my revolution ignites. I will not lose."

Poppy swallowed, a sinking feeling filling her. She had an awful suspicion she would regret it for the rest of her life if Walker strode out that door.

Walker turned to Jennings. "Tie them up."

"Terrance . . ."

"Do as I say."

Dread filled her. She willed it away with herculean effort. Yes, Walker might have the advantage. And yes, he seemed to have seen the broader picture. But he hadn't known it all. He didn't have James yet. He didn't even fully have Beatrix. And Poppy wouldn't let him. She would not let him win. He would *never* win.

She held onto that conviction with dear life.

Poppy looked to Beatrix and whispered, "On three, we run."

Beatrix's eyes widened, but she gave a determined nod.

Poppy inhaled deeply and counted beneath her breath. Walker and Jennings were still deliberating the matter of restraining them, the argument growing heated with every second.

"Dammit, Terrance!"

"*One.*"

"Do not forget who I am, boy."

"*Two.*"

"I am not a bloody boy!"

"Then—"

"*Three.*"

Poppy and Beatrix shot forward in a mad dash. The men had barely time to register it before she crashed into Walker full force. He

hadn't expected the collision and fell backward, but not before Poppy snatched the necklace around his neck and yanked.

He cried out in rage.

"Get them!" he roared at Jennings.

Poppy didn't dare look over her shoulder to see if Jennings followed his order. She and Beatrix sprinted straight for the door. They exploded up the short staircase and would have cleared it had Poppy's foot not caught on the last step. She fell, crashing into the floor in a disgruntled heap.

"Poppy!" Beatrix rushed back to her.

"Go," Poppy said with a grimace, stumbling to her feet.

"Not without you," Beatrix said, linking her arm into Poppy's as they pushed on.

Poppy reached for the door as they arrived at the exit. She rattled the handle.

No.

The door was locked.

Footsteps sounded behind them.

Poppy hastily patted her hair for a pin. Too late, they turned to see Jennings skidding the corner at a run. Poppy steeled herself for whatever was to follow.

Jennings, however, reached past them to insert a key in the lock.

Poppy blinked at him.

"Go," he said. "Warn the officer. I will stall him."

"Thank you, Eli," Beatrix exclaimed. She paused. "Come with us. He will hurt you for letting us go."

Jennings shook his head and slammed open the door. "Go. Now," he commanded. "Before it's too late."

"Eli . . ." Beatrix breathed, catching him by the sleeve of his coat and pulling. He shrugged her off.

"Now!" he roared.

Poppy grabbed Beatrix by the arm and pulled her away from Eli. "Beatrix, we don't have time!"

Reluctantly, her friend nodded, and they burst from the building, dashing down the alley. They had just rounded the corner when a shot rang out.

Beatrix cried out. "Eli!" She turned to Poppy. "We have to go back!"

"We can't go back, Beatrix. Walker will end us. We can only pray Mr. Jennings is safe."

"That is twice now he has saved my life," Beatrix said on a sob.

"And I am eternally grateful to him. But for now, we must survive and pray he does the same. Come!"

Poppy spotted a carriage and ran straight for it. They jumped up

next to the driver before he could protest. His mouth dropped open as he stared at her in shock.

"Whose carriage is this?" she asked the driver.

"The Earl of Crossley, madam."

Damn. Crossley was an ass. But Poppy had no time for *ton* politics or their shocked servants.

"We are appropriating this carriage," Poppy said, brandishing the flintlock at him. The man's eyes widened to saucers, and he scrambled to leap from the carriage.

Beatrice reached for the reins.

Poppy saluted the man. "Tell the Earl of Crossley we will return the carriage after we are done."

And with a single whip, they pulled away, racing to the residence of the man who was in danger because of her.

James brought his horses to a halt before the door covered with smears of blood, Derek not far on his heels.

Never had he known such terror as he did in that moment, his world shaken to the core. He had thought himself free from such crippling emotion. Never imagined he would ever feel such a sense of loss deepening in his chest again. His heart stuck in his throat as the blood left his face.

James dismounted.

Was Poppy hurt? Did Walker have her? How the hell had this happened?

Derek cursed. "Explain," he snapped at Harrington.

"The women exited through this door. It appears that Walker caught them snooping around. I saw them run out of the building. Jennings was shot aiding them. I lost their trail after they commandeered a carriage."

James almost exploded again. He wanted to gouge Geoffrey and Harrington's eyes out for losing sight of Poppy.

"Jennings was shot? Where is he?" Derek asked.

"He took off."

"Not mortal then?"

"I cannot say, sir."

"What's in the building?" Derek queried.

"You should see for yourself, sir."

"James?" His brother placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm fine," James growled and followed them into the building. The entire building had a chill to it, one that carved a deep hole in James. He swept the floor and crates for any sign of a struggle. Found none. Some of his tension eased. Some. He strode to the containers

Harrington pointed at with a grim expression.

"Mother of Mary," James hissed as his eyes fell on the contents.

Derek let out a foul curse. "The women found this?"

Harrington nodded. "It seems that way. I followed Miss Rose to Miss Middleton's residence. She had just arrived. They were in the carriage for a few minutes before returning to the theatre."

"Did they go anywhere in the theatre?" Derek asked.

Harrington shook his head. "No, sir, they came straight here."

"Why the devil didn't you send for me the moment you believed Walker entered the building after them?" James demanded.

"I didn't know that he did, sir. I never saw anyone enter the building after the ladies, only that they came out running, and Mr. Jennings was shot. Walker must have come in another way or already been inside."

Geoffrey had claimed the same.

"You didn't see him?" Derek asked.

"I thought it best to follow the women, sir."

"And you lost them anyway," James growled.

"They got away, James. That is something," Derek said.

"But still we don't know what Walker looks like."

"We know his name. I have men combing every inch of the city for any lead that will direct us to Terrance Walker."

"And who is searching for the women?" Except for bloody Geoffrey, who James now doubted couldn't tell his head from his arse.

"I have my men on that, too."

It's not enough.

"I'm leaving to find Miss Middleton," James declared. "You deal with this." He motioned to the pistols.

"I suggest you go home, James."

His incredulous gaze swung to his brother. "Miss Middleton and Miss Rose are missing, possibly hurt, and you want me to go *home*?"

"Have you met more resourceful women? Harrington said he saw them commandeer a carriage."

"Walker would have followed them," James growled. "You think he'd let them go? What if *he* didn't lose them?"

"Miss Middleton might be seeking you out as we speak, James. She'd go to you, wouldn't she? Go home. I'll personally lead the search for them and Bow Street will handle the weapons. But you must be there if she comes to find you."

"Dammit!" James dragged a hand through his hair. "I bloody can't . . ." Words failed him.

"I know, James. We will find her. We will find Walker. This will be over soon."

"We should have acted last night. Questioned Miss Rose then.

Broken her door down if that was what it took to get answers. We should have anticipated this.”

“What’s done is done. All we can do now is find them and put an end to Walker.”

It went against everything James believed to abandon the search. He couldn’t. Not entirely.

He turned to Harrington. “Return to our residence and watch out for Miss Middleton and Miss Rose. I will try to pick up their trail.”

“James,” Derek said in a low voice.

James dragged both hands over his face. “I’m going to attempt to map out where they might have gone in the carriage. If that doesn’t unearth any leads, I’ll return home and wait.”

On his life, he would.

Derek gave a reluctant nod.

James turned on his heels and left.

Chapter 18

Poppy banged on the door of James's residence with an urgency she rarely expressed. Her arm and leg hurt from her fall, but she felt nothing except growing dread.

She had come from the shadows of the residence, hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, but Poppy felt in her gut something was off. *That man*, Walker, was searching for her—for them. He meant to kill them. And even after shaking him from their trail, Poppy didn't trust him not to find James. So she had to warn him first.

She pounded on the door.

It had taken a good while to shake off Walker. Hours, in fact. Crossley must be furious with his driver, and Poppy hoped the man did not suffer much of the earl's wrath for her actions. Beatrix had parked the carriage one street over in case they needed to leave in a mad dash. Which Poppy fully planned to do as soon as James opened the door.

She rapped harder.

"Dash it, James! Open the door!"

Her grip on the pistol tightened. She could bluff her way out of danger, right? Loaded or not, the pistol made her feel confident. Shielded. Protected, in a way. As if it still held power even though it was quite harmless in its unarmed state.

Maybe he wasn't home. Where was he, then? She didn't have the time or the resources to track him down. Perhaps James not being home was a good thing if Walker did indeed find this house.

What if something has already happened to him?

No, Poppy refused to entertain that outcome.

Her rapping turned more insistent.

He had to be alive.

The door swung open then, and James himself filled the doorway. Poppy's knees wobbled from relief.

"Oh, thank heavens!" Poppy exclaimed, and then blinked, her eyes riveted on his exposed skin. He was dressed in nothing but trousers and a partially unbuttoned shirt, his hair beyond mussed as if he'd just rolled out of bed. Goodness, his chest was broad. Smooth. Muscled. It begged to be touched by her fingers, a feathering touch across those hard, deep, ridges she glimpsed. Cad, but his chest was . . .

Not important at the moment!

He stood speechless for a moment before relief hit his features, and then she was pulled into his arms, crushed against his chest.

"I couldn't bloody find you," he breathed into her hair. "I couldn't bloody find you."

Poppy shut her eyes, and for a precious second, peace settled over her. But there wasn't time for this.

Just as she was about to extract herself from James's embrace, he pushed her away enough to glare down at her, his relief now replaced by an ever-deepening scowl.

"Where the devil have you been?" he demanded. He cast a glance over her head. "Are you alone?"

"Yes, but James—"

"Dammit," he interrupted her. "I've been searching the entire city for you!"

"You have?" She shook her head. That wasn't important either. "Never mind that."

Poppy pushed past him, ignoring his outburst. She swept the foyer with a suspicious gaze.

"Poppy," he barked after her. "While I am always up for the company of a beautiful woman, you have been missing the entire day. What the hell happened?"

Poppy whirled to face him. He thought her beautiful?

She shook her head again. *Not important!*

"Listen to me, James. You are here. Unharmful. Which will not remain the case for long if we do not leave this instant and go somewhere safe."

He looked unimpressed. "Not before you tell me what happened."

"There is no time to explain! He might be *here*." Poppy brandished her pistol. "We must leave at once!"

James's eyes widened. "Where the devil did you get that?" He jumped back. "Is that one of Walker's pistols?"

Poppy came up short. "You know about Walker's pistols?"

"You returned to the theatre to snoop."

"How—"

"I have men everywhere."

Of course, he had. "I'll explain in the carriage, James."

"You will explain now," James snapped. He held out his hand. "Give me that pistol before you hurt yourself."

Rather than relinquishing it, Poppy waived the pistol in his face. "You do not understand, Walker will be here soon, James, I know it. We must go."

She did not know by what means Walker planned to take care of James, but she would not allow him to win. It was her own doing that the villain even knew his name.

James stomped to the door and slammed it shut. "No one enters this house without me knowing it. Rest assured, this place is secured. Now hand me the pistol, Poppy, then we will talk."

"Dash it, Shaw, you don't grasp the situation!"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Explain to me then. And will you stop brandishing that damn pistol and hand it over? Did you steal it from the bloody crates?"

"Yes, I stole it," Poppy said. "To present you the evidence of what we found. We are in imminent danger, James."

"You are safe here."

"Why must men be so bloody stubborn?" It would be better to leave, but the next best thing would be to send for reinforcement and secure the house, Poppy supposed. After all, who was to say that Walker was not lying in wait for them outside? He might not have even found James yet, though the chill down her spine argued against that hope. Either way, if James wanted the truth, he'd have to follow her to get it.

"Where the hell are you going?" he snapped as she marched to the nearest room.

"We need to find a safe spot where we can hold our own."

"Where we can . . . Poppy—"

Poppy put up her hand to silence James, "What's in that room?"

"It's the bloody parlor," James growled, stomping after her. She gasped when he suddenly leaned over and snatched the pistol from her hand, disarming her.

"There, that's all better." He tucked the pistol into his breeches. "Now would you mind explaining to me what the hell you think you are doing?"

"We need to call for reinforcements and secure the house *now*."

"Oh, I think it's a little late for that," a deep, mocking voice said.

James and Poppy whirled toward the parlor door and froze.

Walker stood there, flintlock in hand, aim true to James's heart.

"Who the hell are you?" James demanded. "And how did you get inside?"

Poppy groaned. "*That's* Terrance Walker."

Walker spared her a wickedly evil smile. "Thank you for leading me right to Mr. Shaw, madam. Or may I call you Poppy, since you have taken leave to call me by mine?"

His words sent a tremor down Poppy's spine.

She had led Walker straight to James.

Not an ounce of emotion betrayed James's face. His features were locked in stone. But Poppy could feel the whiplash of his fury. She would be at the end of it later.

"Terrance Walker," James drawled. "What a pretty dress. I'd have ordered tea and biscuits had I known to expect your company."

Walker ignored James, his gaze riveted on Poppy. "I grew quite fond of the jewel you snatched from my neck. I think I'll have it

back.”

James stiffened. He slanted an accusing look her way—*What the devil happened in that basement?*

Poppy flinched inwardly.

I’m sorry, her eyes sent back.

We will discuss this later, his gaze promised before he turned back to Walker.

“You’ll get nothing from her, Walker, and you better bloody forget her name, too. If I hear it on your lips one more time, I don’t care if you have a pistol on me, I will kill you.”

Poppy stared at James, the rough line of his jaw, the thick brows that framed deep-set golden eyes. He was so big. So strong and alone on the winding road of danger that he walked. Poppy knew, in that impossible moment, that she wanted to stride down that path right by his side.

James wanted to throttle the minx beside him.

Walker knew her *name*.

Knew *his* damn name.

Just what the hell happened in that basement?

Walker’s smile turned foxlike.

James couldn’t have been more shocked. The man had left no detail to chance. Even his lips were colored strawberry, and his cheeks were pinked. No wonder they could never find him. They’d been looking for a man, not a woman, which made his presence at the theatre suddenly understandable. It was the perfect spot for hiding. Not only was the bastard slippery, he was deuced clever too.

James shifted his gaze to this pistol. He didn’t much care for it aimed at him, but it didn’t alarm him either. His entire focus was to get Poppy out of the line of fire. Out of this house.

“You shot Jennings,” James accused.

“Eli lives.”

“That’s good. His testimony will be the end for you. It’s over, Walker, we have your pistols. We have your name. We have you.”

Walker’s lips thinned. “It’s over when I say it’s over.”

James did smile then.

All bluster.

“You think this ends with me?” Walker spat. “That is not how this ends, Shaw. If I am out of play someone else will take my place.”

“Then we will deal with them when they do. And any other who follows. But make no mistake, Walker. An example will be made of you. Whoever does decide to fill your place should do so with caution if at all.”

“Our cause is bigger than you, bigger than us,” Walker drawled. His gaze shifted to Poppy, and James stiffened. “How *did* a woman like you find my pistols?”

“Direct your questions to me,” James growled. To Poppy, he snapped. “Stay behind me.”

“So protective,” Walker purred. “The lady is quite resourceful; I can see why you are fond of her. Despite the odds against her in the basement, she charged me with determination.”

James clenched his jaw.

Ah, yes, he was going to throttle the woman. And then he was never letting her out of his sight again.

James spotted a shadow pass beyond Walker outside the window. It would be over soon.

“Hand over your pistol, Walker. You’re done. All that is left is picking a fight with me. I would not recommend it. You will lose.”

“I’m the one with the weapon, Shaw. Best remember that. And it’s about time I wrap this up.”

“Very well, let us finish this. I have things to do.”

For the first time, Walker looked uncertain. He bloody should be. A pistol was the only advantage the bastard had. And that, to James, wasn’t much. James didn’t fear pain, neither did he fear death. He only feared one thing—Poppy’s safety.

Outside, gunfire exploded.

James snatched Poppy and pushed her toward the exit, taking advantage of Walker’s momentary distraction. The man swung his pistol to every corner of the room.

Fool.

“Follow me,” James snapped as they cleared the room and led the way to the study where he kept his pistols. He strode straight to the glass cabinet and yanked it open, reaching for his dueling pistols, already loaded and ready for a fight.

He tucked one pistol into his waistband and snapped at Poppy over his shoulder, “You will bloody stay here until I get back.”

His command was met with silence.

James swung around.

Poppy wasn’t with him.

“Bloody everlasting hell!”

More shots rang out.

James’s blood ran cold. Drawing on years of experience, he dispelled the ice in his veins and centered his being. He willed his heartbeat to slow down, take in the sudden quiet that haunted the house.

Had Poppy been shot?

No. His answer was certain. She had not. He hadn’t heard any cry

of pain.

Then he heard it. A woman's voice shouting: "Walker! You made a terrible mistake this night!"

Bloody hell.

Women were nothing but trouble.

James ran from the room, pistol drawn. He heard a small curse and the front door crashing open. He arrived in time to witness a flurry of skirts dashing after Walker.

Damn woman! He was going to blister her behind for this.

He didn't know what angered him more, that she drove him to the height of madness or that she carelessly placed her life in danger.

Poppy Middleton was a menace to the world.

James set out after her.

Chapter 19

Poppy grunted as her knees scraped the floor where she landed in an ungraceful heap. She cursed her feet for having to tangle at that ill-timed minute.

James was ahead of her, having overtaken her as he darted down the hall.

Poppy moved to rise. There was no time to assess the damage or whine about the pain. She had to follow James. But just as she rose to her feet, Walker rushed out of the drawing room and headed for the front door.

He was going to get away!

Poppy couldn't allow that. She had to stall him until James emerged armed and ready to apprehend him.

"Walker!" she called out. It worked. He turned to her. She immediately shifted out of his direct sight, into a doorway. She had no desire to get shot. "You made a terrible mistake this night!"

More shots rang out.

What on earth was going on outside?

Walker cursed and slipped out the door.

Poppy dashed after him with a single-minded focus: *He will not escape.*

The moment she exited the front door, she promptly drew to a stop six yards from where Walker stood frozen. Her gaze flicked beyond him. Derek and two men she did not recognize waited, pistols drawn, in the center of the street.

"You are the ones who have been shooting up the night?" Poppy asked.

"Yes, ma'am," the man to Derek's left answered.

Poppy folded her arms over her chest, satisfied by the scene before her. To Walker, she said, "Did you truly think you would get away?"

"*That* is Walker?" one of the men asked with disbelief. "He's a wench."

"Does that, then, make him a villainess?" the other man asked.

A low growl from Derek and the men clamped their mouths shut. A tall shadow fell over her, and Poppy yelped when she was yanked behind James's broad back.

"Stay out of sight," he snapped. "Or I will lock you away and swallow the damn key."

"Put the pistol down, Walker," Derek called out. "As you can see, you are outnumbered."

"Who the hell are you?" Walker demanded.

The corner of Derek's lips lifted in answer.

Poppy peeked around James's broad back to watch Walker do as they bid. Arms outstretched, he bent low and placed his flintlock on the ground and slowly straightened again.

"Kick it away from you," James ordered.

Walker pushed the pistol away with his boot.

"I'll retrieve it for you," Poppy said, moving to step around James. His arm swung out blocking her.

"Do you want to be dragged over my bloody knee?"

Poppy paused. She shook her head. "No . . ."

"Then stay put."

Poppy sighed. James was furious. She could not blame him. Nothing about today had gone remotely as planned.

The ominous rattle of carriage chains and the echo of hooves had them all stiffening. Everyone froze; holding their breaths. Then the driver drew the horses to a halt.

"Beatrix!" Poppy exclaimed.

"Poppy? Are you alright?" Her gaze flicked over the men, Walker, and then back to Poppy. "When you didn't return with Mr. Shaw, I thought I'd investigate. It seems you have everything in hand."

"Is that Jennings with you?" Poppy asked and attempted to move past James, but was once again curtailed by his hand on her wrist.

Beatrix nodded. "He lost consciousness. We must get him help right away or his wound might become infected."

"Geoffrey," James said. "Return Miss Rose to her residence and see that Jennings gets medical care."

The man that must be Geoffrey nodded.

"What about the carriage?" Beatrix asked. She looked over to Poppy.

"It belongs to the Earl of Crossley," Poppy announced. "We must return it."

"Ah yes, Crossley's stolen carriage. I almost forgot about that," James drawled, tone wary.

"Borrowed carriage," Poppy corrected.

"Derek," James snapped out. "Can you deal with all this?"

Derek's nod was the last thing Poppy glimpsed before she was pulled into the house again, the slam of the door the final nail in the coffin of her old life.

James dragged Poppy down the hall and into the library, where a fire still crackled. He shoved her into a chair and looked her over. She stared at him warily.

She could have been harmed today.

His chest tightened at the thought.

How could he ever walk away from her? He couldn't, and that was a bloody startling realization. One that shot his heart into his throat.

Where the hell did that leave him?

"You are not returning to the theatre."

"I'd say not. We found the necklace."

"Yes, ripped it right from Walker's neck, it seems."

"Everything turned out well, do you not agree?"

Only the slightest hitch in her tone betrayed her nervousness, but James heard it.

"If your definition of well is having a pistol aimed at my heart, then yes, I suppose it did."

"Walker has been apprehended."

"You could have been hurt, or worse, do you understand that?" James dragged a hand through his hair. "You are the bloody Queen of Mischief."

"If anything, what I am is touched by madness." She gave him a look that caused his blood to heat, but he was not quite done being furious yet.

"I may very well agree with you." He raked her from head to toe. "Only a madwoman would steal Crossley's carriage."

"We always intended to return it."

"Do you know how many witnesses there were? You were seen. I gathered a complete description of you and Miss Rose."

James's gut clenched.

If the wrong person witnessed her crime, the scandal would roll through town like a wave. He did not like the sound of that, did not like the idea of Poppy ruined.

"No one that recognized me, I'm sure."

"Let us bloody hope so," James growled. "What else haven't you seen fit to tell me?"

"You know everything, James."

"I don't know how you figured out Walker had a storage space. That seems like information that would have benefited my case."

"I overheard Marks confront Jennings about using the theatre's storage space while sparring. I didn't think anything about it until you sent me home after we snuck into his dressing room."

"What made you think about it then?" James demanded.

He listened intently as Poppy walked him through the events of the day that led to Walker aiming a pistol at his heart. Her findings. Her suspicions. James still could not believe he had dismissed the older woman in his search for Walker. She hadn't been on the list of staff members he received; hence he hadn't given her a second thought.

"You should have sent for me."

"I wanted to make sure I was not stark raving mad, James. And I

also thought you'd dismiss me until I had proof. At the time, it had sounded so right and yet impossibly far-fetched. What could Jennings have possibly stored for Walker? Confirming that seemed harmless. Had we known what we were dealing with, things would have gone differently."

"You weren't supposed to be dealing with anything. You should have stepped back and left it to me."

"Don't you see, James? I didn't *want* to leave it to you alone." She averted her face. "I've been struggling to discover how my world fits after the fire, and helping Beatrix gave me a sense of purpose."

That took James back.

The fire had been two years ago. Had she felt lost all that time? "Your world fits where it has always fit—with your family. In society."

She shook her head. "Something happened that day. All the things I used to want seemed meaningless. My life no longer made sense to me. I've felt more alive this week than I've felt in over two years. I don't expect you to understand. I'm not sure I do. But I know I don't regret any of it."

James understood.

He understood perfectly. Poppy had a near-death experience. James had had many. He could never quite return to his old self. And each time he came through such an encounter, it was as if the limits of his mind, his life lifted a bit more.

"I've come face to face with death too," James said. "But running around London chasing danger is not the answer."

"I know," she whispered. "At least, I know that now."

James lowered down next to her, his heart constricting in emotion. "My mother committed suicide. My father, too, hours after he found her. He couldn't face the scandal. No one could. Derek and I were left only with each other."

"I'm sorry, James. That is dreadful."

"It was a long time ago," he said gruffly.

"It doesn't mean it doesn't still hurt." She laid a hand on his. "You said everyone abandoned you. Does that include your aunt? Is that why you do not get along with her?"

He nodded. "She abandoned us for a count in Russia. Now she has returned with a nine-year-old boy. She wants us to meet him."

"Is that so bad? You have a nephew now. You can be a family. One can never have too much family."

"My aunt has consumption."

"That's horrible."

James steeled himself against the foreign emotion invading his belly and moving through his gut to the region of his chest. He never spoke of his family. Not if he could help it. But this was Poppy.

“My point is that our life seemed meaningless for a long time. So we forged a new one, this life. If it was possible for us, it is possible for you.”

“Nothing is set in stone,” Poppy said softly.

“Nothing.” James inhaled deeply. “At least, your family is not cursed.”

“Neither is yours.”

“You believe that? After what I just told you?”

“I don’t believe in curses,” Poppy said simply. “I believe in actions. Results.”

“You sound like Derek.” The corners of James’s mouth lifted. “And you should apply that to yourself, Poppy. Believe me, you will find your purpose again.”

“I think I already did,” she whispered. She shifted closer to James, and he inhaled the sweetness of violets.

His entire being responded instantly.

Bloody hell. She was in his very veins.

James shut his eyes to think. Like a near-death experience, after spending time with Poppy, he could never go back to his past life without her. Yet, he couldn’t fully enter her life in society, and he’d not allow her fully into his life of espionage. It was too dangerous. So, where did that leave them?

Together.

He opened his eyes.

“Ballrooms and parties feel so silly now, do they not?” Poppy asked, as if picking up on some of his thoughts.

“Nothing you can desire could ever be silly.”

Her gaze lifted to meet his. “Not even dancing the night away in a ridiculously expensive gown?”

“Not even that.”

“What if I wanted a kiss?” she asked softly. “Would that be silly?”

“No,” he said throatily. “Kissing is never silly.”

“What if I wished to touch?”

“Touching is human nature.”

“I see,” she murmured. Her voice was soft. Breathless. “And what if I wanted you? Would that not be silly?”

James’s body hardened instantly.

“Not silly. An absolute requirement.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” James growled. “Because I bloody want you too.”

“Even though I’m the Queen of Mischief?” Her grin lit the heavens in the darkest night.

His eyes strayed to her mouth. And James lowered his head so that his lips hovered above hers. They were soft, plump, and pink.

Perfection.

“From the moment I met you, I have been a lost cause.”

The corners of her mouth tilted into a smirk. “Could you say that again? I don’t believe I heard you correctly.”

“I’m going to bloody throttle you.”

But he didn’t. Instead, he kissed her.

Chapter 20

Warmth spread through Poppy as James's lips fell on hers. A thrill of inevitability snaked down her spine. She sank into him as he gathered her into his arms and dragged her onto his lap, deepening the kiss. Desire unfurled in her body and tore through her veins with a force that left her breathless and aching.

This man was all she wanted in life—a dream she'd not even known she'd been cultivating for as long as she had. Her arms circled his neck.

"Bloody hell," James breathed as his lips pulled away from her leaving her well-loved mouth bereaved. "You are driving me insane with need."

His smoldering gaze bewitched her, and had she not been cocooned in his embrace, Poppy was sure she would have staggered a step back, woozy, and fallen flat on her behind. As it were, that look shot a bolt of fire to her belly.

"You have stopped kissing me, James," she whispered. "Don't stop."

"Poppy . . . do you know what you are asking of me?"

She stared at him from beneath her lashes.

Yes.

"Dammit. I can't deny you anything when you look at me like that."

She arched a brow and grinned. "That is why I often look at you like that. Make me yours, James."

"I'm not a man that ever stands aside. If we do this, love, you *will* be mine."

"I'm already yours, James." A note of needy frustration crept into her voice. "Don't make me wait any longer."

"I ought to make you wait until our wedding night," James drawled. "This is how it's supposed to be done."

"How presumptuous of you," Poppy sputtered, taken by complete surprise. Wedding night! As in wedded to James? It ought to have crossed her mind, but he had so fully commandeered all her senses all common threads had fled. But now that the thought of his wife did cross her mind, it lodged securely as a permanent fixture in her heart.

Her breath caught in the throat.

When exactly had that become a goal?

She drowned in the depth of his gaze.

Does it truly matter? It has become the goal.

He was her match.

"You can bet I'm presumptuous, love."

"I quite like that side of you," Poppy admitted truthfully. "And the thought of you being mine does wicked things to me."

"Were you put on this earth to slay me?" he ground out, his voice rough with desire. Something she couldn't decipher flickered in his gaze. "I am not an easy man to live with, Poppy."

"Splendid. I am no breeze either," Poppy countered.

He broke out in a grin. "No? Certainly not the most biddable woman I've ever met."

"You don't want a biddable woman. You want a woman whose sanity is questioned because of all the mischievous choices she makes. And I want you. Now, tell me," Poppy bit her lower lip and grinned, "what must a woman do to get seduced? Shall I beg?"

His eyes smoldered a moment before his mouth was on hers again, and he claimed her mouth with purpose, an aching need that made her heart skip a beat. His hand strayed to cup her breast through her dress, and Poppy arched against his touch, trusting her body to translate her increasing passion.

"You are not wearing any stays," he growled, voice gruff with desire.

Oh! She'd forgotten about that. "I was in a hurry this morning," Poppy explained.

"Never wear them again," he breathed against the column of her neck as he bent to drop a soft kiss to the swell of her breasts. He drove her desire to heights she never imagined possible. "Except when you leave the house. Only then."

"What about servants?"

"Good point," he said hoarsely. "You won't be leaving my bed. Ever."

Poppy chuckled, the sound dying on a small moan when James took her breasts into his mouth through the cotton of her dress.

"Too much material," he growled against her mouth and started to peel her dress away.

"What if someone enters?"

"No one would dare," James growled, then explained, "Derek went to Bow Street. He won't be back until much later."

Poppy nodded and was once again swept up by the pleasure James incited as his hand strayed down the length of her leg.

Don't ever stop, please.

Her skin felt taut, sensitive, and on fire. She was powerless to resist the passion building inside of her. She hissed out a breath as James pulled the sleeve of her chemise down her shoulder.

A breath of hot hair fanned her hardened peak before James lowered his mouth to taste her. Her entire body clenched in need as his tongue darted over her nipple. It was impossible to focus when

James had so expertly taken command over her body. Her entire world had been reduced to one word repeated over and over in her mind.

More. More. More.

She clung to him, trusting, accepting, almost pleading for him to take her even higher, to a place she knew existed but could not yet fathom. He played her body like a piano, each chord he struck more beautiful than the next. Her hands shoved into his hair as she surrendered to every flick of his tongue. The hard crest of his manhood carved into her thigh, and she wiggled over him, testing, teasing.

He groaned into her nipple.

Poppy could never have imagined such intimacy with a man, especially this man. And while she had known she felt more for James than she had for any other man, known that she was his, the recognition that she loved him madly and entirely slammed into her lungs, causing a slight gasp to part from her lips. A feeling of warmth spread through her at the revelation, the invading emotion foreign but welcome.

His hand skimmed up her leg as the other anchored her in his embrace, and Poppy fisted her hands in his wavy, auburn locks.

“Need you naked. Now,” James said. His eyes met hers. Possessive. Needful.

Oh yes.

Smiling coyly, she slowly backed out of his embrace, her fingers untangling from his locks as she placed her foot on the carpeted floor and rose before him. She dragged her other sleeve over her shoulder as she straightened, watching his eyes narrow on her with lust.

Poppy didn’t know where she got the courage to be so bold. Perhaps it was the hunger in his gaze. Maybe it was the need that rattled in his voice when he said he wanted her naked. Perhaps it was just James’s presence. Whichever it was, she shrugged out of her clothes without any shame. The material pooled at her feet.

“You are bloody beautiful, Poppy.”

She grinned.

He rose, his full height towering over her, his strong hands reaching for the buttons of his shirt. Poppy inhaled a deep breath as he began to undo each button with deliberate slowness.

Mother of heaven!

Her eyes fell to his powerfully rippled chest as he shrugged out of his shirt. Belatedly, she wondered if such intimacy was supposed to be shared outside the bedchamber, but all thoughts scattered when his fingers lowered to yank at his breeches.

He let them drop to his ankles.

He stood before her in all his glory, powerful, unabashed, and entirely hers. She hardly registered him shrugging out of his boots and disregarding what was left of his attire.

“Like what you see, love?”

“I . . .” Poppy swallowed. “I’m not sure what I’m seeing.”

He chuckled. “This is all of me wanting all of you.”

Her lashes fluttered to meet his gaze, and once they touched, he took a step toward her. “You will spend your life with me?”

Poppy didn’t have to think, simply answered, “I cannot think of a better way to spend it.”

She was swept off her feet almost instantly, the brush of her flesh against James’s warming her to the toes. He carried her to the plush carpet and laid her gently before the fire.

“Poppy, do you know what is happening next?”

“You ravish me.”

He stared down at her, and then slowly, an illuminating smile stretched upon his lips. “There is more to ravishment than the word.”

“I know, but do not spoil it by explaining. I trust you.”

He lowered himself over her, his fingers tracing along the slope of her leg up to her thigh. Poppy trembled beneath his touch and came to life beneath his gaze.

“Your trust means everything to me,” he growled.

He slid a finger inside her, and she exhaled as relief swamped her. This was exactly what she wanted. This man. His touch. Everything he offered.

“You are so exquisite,” he whispered in her ear as his finger delved deeper. “Everything I thought I could never claim for myself.”

Poppy arched against him.

“Christ, you’re ready.”

He settled between her thighs, stretching them wider, his finger sliding out against her thigh, trailing up her body, circling of her nipple to moisten the tip before he opened his mouth and sucked the taste of her.

Lord above, Poppy had never seen anything so wanton.

“I want to taste you, too,” she breathed, unsure what that meant but wanting it all the same.

“For the love of heaven, woman,” James hissed between ragged breaths. “You are in my blood.”

“Make me yours, James.”

James’s hand reached between them and slipped one finger inside her again before she felt something bigger, harder nudge at her entrance. Poppy’s hands slid to his buttocks and pulled him closer to her. Their breaths mixed in a fizzle of current. The tip of his hardness sank into her as his thumb worked her delicate bud with gentle flicks.

It felt foreign. Exotic. Right. She drew a gasping breath.

“Are you alright?”

“Yesss,” she hissed, pushing the palm of her hands over the hair of his chest to wind her arms around his neck. “Do not dare stop now.”

The warm glow of the fire crackled as he pushed in all the way, his mouth moving along her collarbone, worshipping her body with soft kisses. A sharp, momentary pain pricked as he broke through all resistance. But there was no time to dwell on the hurt, already fading, as the intimacy of the moment brought shooting stars to Poppy’s universe. James gave a low moan.

“Poppy? Are you still well?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

Yes. Yes. Yes.

“You?” It was barely a whisper.

His chest rumbled against her body as he chuckled. “Christ, yes.”

Then he started to rock his hips. Poppy had thought what they had done so far magical. This was so much . . . *more*. At first, his thrusts were slow, deliberate. With each push, they grew more urgent, feverish. The discomfort was all but gone, the fullness of him probed and teased until the explosion of stars that had lit her universe was no longer contained within the moment but burst through her entire body.

She arched against him with a cry of pleasure, her fingers digging into the back of his head, tangling in his hair. His mouth found hers, the rocking of his hips reaching a new height of frenzy. She had never felt so alive as she did when she came undone in his arms. It was in that moment that she realized she was not unsure about her life any longer. She knew exactly what she wanted.

Poppy watched as James’s face erupted in dazzling pleasure. One thrust, two, and then he stilled above her, his breathing as ragged as hers. He slipped out from her, and the loss would have been devastating had their limbs not still been entwined. He settled beside her on his elbow, his face lowering to rest on a balled fist. His eyes drifted over her face, probing, loving.

“Are you alright?” he whispered.

“You keep asking me that,” Poppy murmured. “Do you expect a different answer?”

His features softened. “I’ve been stumbling for what seems to be my entire life, and then you came along and swept me on my ass. I love you, Poppy. You are a dream. My dream.”

Poppy’s lips parted in shock.

“You did not expect a confession.” He smirked.

Her blank mind spun its scattered wits together. She hadn’t

expected a confession, no. Not this soon. Men, as far as she knew, usually kept their feelings closer to their hearts. But then, James Shaw was no ordinary man.

“I love you too, James.”

His look turned suspicious. “Are you merely returning the sentiment?”

“Your confession was a sentiment?”

“No.” He sounded offended.

“Neither is what I feel for you.”

Something moved behind his eyes, and Poppy swore it was relief.

“You won’t disappear when I blink, will you?”

“I shall never abandon you, James.” She traced a finger over his cheek. “For all your arrogance, you are uncertain of this?”

He scoffed and kissed the inside of her palm. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. But be warned, love, I’ll be the most tedious, obsessive of husbands.”

Poppy laughed. “I doubt that. At least the tedious part. The other, I believe. Also, I have not agreed to marry you.”

“You said you’d spend your life with me.”

“I never said as your wife.”

His eyes glowed with a sudden feral light. A challenge. “You *will* be my wife.”

“Convince me.”

And, Lord, did he.

Epilogue

Two days later

James rapped on the door of 23 Mount Street, his brother beside him. There was still one tiny matter to conclude where his time as Greenwich was concerned, which was why James and Derek were paying a call to the residence of the Earl of Crossley. And it was not to return his carriage—that had been left at the spot the women had appropriated the vehicle at gunpoint.

James grinned.

Christ, he loved that woman.

“You look like you’ve swallowed a bloody unicorn.”

James chuckled. “Powerful, majestic beasts according to the Greeks.”

“Also romanticized.”

“I’m not romanticized.” James shot his brother a glare, but it was impossible to set his mouth into a grim line. He *was* infatuated. Horrendously.

Derek gave a short, placating nod. “Madeline will be pleased you are taking a wife.”

James didn’t give a damn what Madeline thought.

They were meeting the boy tonight and Poppy had insisted both mother and son be invited to their wedding. James had given in, but only because it was impossible to refuse Poppy anything. That woman had a way of making him leap through hoops.

“What about you?” James asked. “Are you pleased?”

Derek shrugged. “You wedded to a Middleton will only give me more headaches, I suspect.”

James chuckled. “I’m retiring from the life. You have no reason to utilize your resources on my future wife.”

“I’m retiring, as well.”

The sudden statement had James’s jaw dropping open.

While James had never thought he’d give up the life he’d built working for the crown, meeting Poppy had changed that for him. His brother was another matter entirely.

“You’re bloody serious.” It was more than that. James narrowed his eyes. “You’re stepping out as Wolverton.”

“It makes sense with your wedding.”

“Neither Poppy nor I care about titles and whatnots.”

Derek nodded. “I’m well aware, but it’s not in our blood to go into situations half-cocked. If you are doing this, then we are both doing it wholly and completely.”

“There will be a scandal,” James warned.

Derek shrugged. "Luckily, the Middletons were born to weather impropriety."

James's eyes widened. "Was that humor? From *you*?"

"You know I'm right."

"Does this mean you are in the market for a wife?" James couldn't believe he was asking his brother that. It was a testament to how ridiculously out of their depth they were.

"No."

"All in good time, I imagine."

"No."

James cracked a grin. "I thought I'd never meet the woman who could tempt me to shackle myself to her completely. Yet here I am."

"I am not you."

"She would have to be something to catch your attention."

"I. Am. Not. You."

The door suddenly swung open to reveal a staunch-looking butler. James had entirely forgotten they were standing before Crossley's door.

"May I help you?"

Right. Down to business.

James forced his way past the butler.

Derek patted the man on the shoulder. "Is Crossley home?"

"N-No, sir."

"Good, that's not who we are here to see anyway."

"Maverick, who is—" The voice stopped abruptly as James and Derek turned to the man who had just entered the foyer.

James's lips curved upward frostily. "Ah, just the man we came to see."

"*This* is the man who got the better of you?" Derek questioned.

"He struck me over the head from behind. That hardly counts."

"G-Greenwich?" Hargrove stuttered.

"Guess again," James drawled. "Name's James Shaw and this here is my brother Derek Shaw, and you, Hargrove, were responsible for the accident on the grand opening night at Regent Theatre."

Hargrove paled.

"I wasn't even there!" he exclaimed.

"You paid one of the theatre staff," Derek drawled. "Samuel Brown. He confessed."

"Which is why," James said. "We are arresting you, you little bastard."

"On whose authority?"

"Bow Street." James glanced at Derek. "He stuck his tongue in my future wife's mouth. Struck me over the head. Nearly killed Charlotte Rose. My fist is itching. I vote we beat his ass thoroughly before

dragging him in.”

“Same page, brother.”

Thanks for reading!

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About the Author



Tanya Wilde developed a passion for reading when she had nothing better to do than lurk in the library during her lunch breaks. Her love affair with pen and paper followed soon after she had devoured all of the library's historical romance books!

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